PASSAGE TO DIVINITY

(THE EARLY LIFE OF SRI SWAMI RAMDAS)

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PASSAGE TO DIVINITY

THE EARLY LIFE OF SWAMI RAMDAS

BY
CHANDRA SHEKHAR
(Incorporating "The Early Life" in
Beloved Papa's own words)

Among thousands of men scarce one striveth for perfection; of the successful strivers, scarce one knoweth Me in essence.

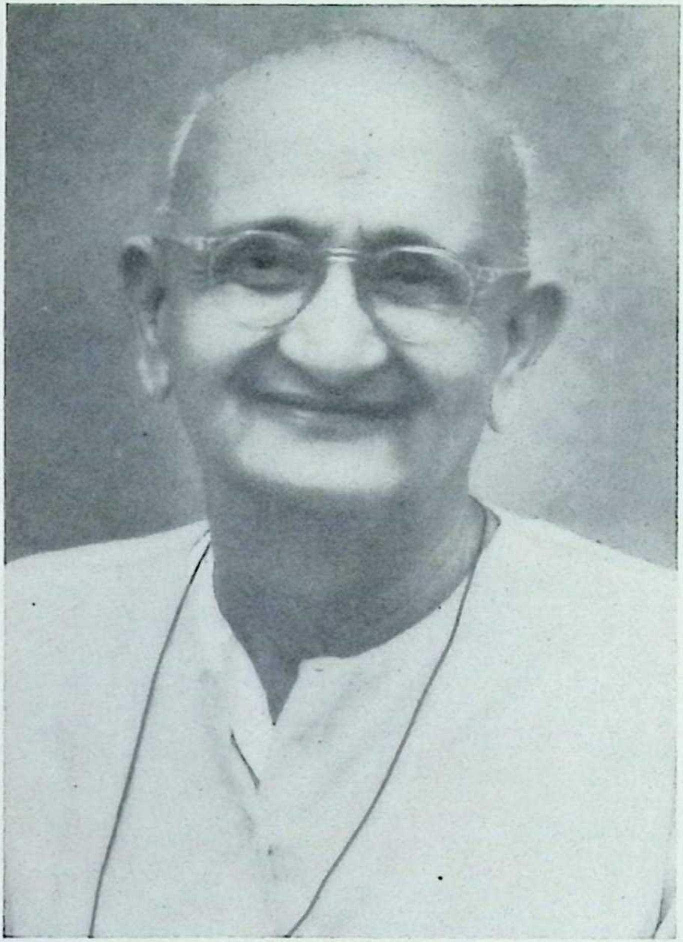
—Bhagavad Gita, VII, 3

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Sri Swami Ramdas

To
My Dear Parents
With All Love

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Preface

IT WOULD BE sheer euphemism to call this sketchy brochure a biography in any sense of the term; nor do I lay claim to any such high pretensions. However, I fondly trust that this humble work will prove to be a useful introduction to Swamiji's great autobiographical works, *In Quest of God* and *In the Vision of God.* If it should create an interest, in such of the readers as had not the privilege of coming into Swamiji's blessed contact, to know more about him, his mission and his message to the world, I shall feel highly flattered and amply recompensed.

In this third edition an entire new chapter has been incorporated, namely, "The Early Life" in beloved Papa's own words. This had originally appeared in the Ashram monthly, *The Vision*, in seven serial instalments in 1965-66. It deals "with the events, circumstances, influences and environments that awakened, nourished and accelerated the spiritual light and aspiration and, later, the progress towards, and the attainment of, the supreme goal of Self-realisation."

— *Chandra Shekhar*

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[illegible]

The Early Life

by Swami Ramdas

IT IS THE WILL of God, in whom Ramdas has taken complete refuge, that he should record the story of his spiritual evolution from the time knowledge of things dawned upon him, that is, at the transition of his child life into boyhood. He is concerned only with events, circumstances, influences and environments that awakened, nourished and accelerated the spiritual light and aspiration and, later, the progress towards, and the attainment of, the supreme goal of Self-realisation. When he looks back from his present spiritual state, he can clearly see how God in His unbounded Grace led and guided him through quite a labyrinth of conflicting and puzzling experiences with glimpses of the divine light flashing out now and again all through his career.

His early life was spent, to all outward appearances, in the same manner as that of all other children born and growing around him. When he was yet in the cradle, it seems some intimate relations did notice a rare light and brilliance in his eyes. This may mean anything or nothing. At the age of five or six, he was, as it was

common, put to school. Soon he found out that he was not at all meant for the discipline of the school life which was in those days rigid, hard and mortifying. He had no taste for the so-called education of those days. He loved his fellow-mates and teachers, but from the latter he received the most cruel chastisement. His young spirit was bruised and tortured. At home also he met, often in the midst of love and solicitude, harshness and punishment. His teachers and parents were acting with the best of intentions, believing firmly that by the methods they employed they were moulding his life for a good and great purpose.

Early Influences

He discovered that attempts were made both at school and at home to put him into a mould into which he refused to be pressed. His spirit hungered for freedom—freedom from the shackles that sought to keep him in duress. Although he appeared to be outwardly submissive, yet inwardly there was in him a recoil from the control being forced upon him.

Side by side with these external impediments to the free expression of his life, there was also encouragement and a favourable atmosphere for the growth and expansion of his soul and for the cultivation of a liberal outlook, nay, for the manifestation of love towards all beings alike. His parents, although bound by orthodox

principles—the rules of caste and community—were broadminded and liberal in their conduct and behaviour towards all who came in contact with them. They were observing some rules of caste only in consonance with the requirements of social status and condition. They did not seem to believe in these restrictions. They were religious in temperament and had their devotional practices in their own way by which they communed with the Divine and relied on Him in all moments of stress and trouble. So the atmosphere in the home was for Ramdas congenial for the growth of his soul.

These early influences produced a most impressive stamp upon his life. The regular and disciplined Puja of his grandfather, the daily Japa of his mother—for however short a period snatched out of her multifarious duties as the mistress of the house and in the care taken of her many children,—the devotion and prayers of his father whom he used to join every evening, the reading of the *Puranas* by a widowed aunt, the never-ending flow of songs of saints from the mouth of his aged grandmother—all these contributed greatly towards creating a suitable background or basis for the spiritual evolution of Ramdas' soul.

It was verily a tug of war between two forces, as it were, one tending to fetter his life and force it into a system which aimed at stamping out initiative and freedom, and the other attempting to release him from

the earth-born tangle of a mundane life and raise him up to a purer, greater and illumined spiritual region.

His life during that period between six and ten years, was spent often in play and solitude. He had absolutely no interest in school life or in study. His mind would refuse to be engaged with them. The vast space, the green trees and the solitary spots seemed to invite him and claim him as their own.

In the home were observed all the religious festivals which Hindus normally celebrate, and Ramdas used to take part with whole-hearted interest in these festivals. It was through these festivals, Bhajans and listening to the stories of the *Puranas* that he came to understand life and its implications. Playgrounds brought him in close grips with life's struggle, aspirations and attainments.

There was an Avadhut in the family who was usually looked upon as an idiot. He had absolutely no interest in life's activity of any kind. He had to be bathed, clothed and fed even though he had grown at the time to the age of about fourteen when Ramdas first knew him. One thing he noticed in him was that whenever evening Bhajan was going on, he would rush away from the room in which he was to stay, and sit in front of us with a smiling face, listening to the songs. He was dumb. Now his face would light up with a strange glow. Except for this interest, he had nothing to do with the world. He

would not recognize even his own mother. The conduct of this personality left a mysterious impression on Ramdas at his early age. Ramdas often used to sit near this person and watch his ways. He was perfectly non-violent, as Ramdas had seen him slowly picking off with his fingers some ants and poisonous insects which were biting him, and leaving them a little away from him.

Then again, when Ramdas was about eight years old, two Sannyasins from the Punjab happened to visit his house. Of the brothers, they selected Ramdas for their service. He used to be in their company most of the day and run errands and do odd little bits of service for them. The kindly way in which they would call him used to evoke in him a strange attraction and respect towards these wandering Sannyasins.

Then another great spiritual event in his life was the visit of the Swami of Chitrapur Math. Chitrapur Math is a spiritual institution belonging to the Saraswat community in which Ramdas had his birth. The spiritual head of this Math and of the community was at the time touring the district. Ramdas had his Darshan and, young though he was, he was keen on knowing all the details of the austere life of this great Swami. He used to watch the spiritual practices and the usual routine activities of the Swami with great keenness and interest. Sometimes a desire would creep into his mind that since he found that the Swami's life was the ideal life, he too

should one day become like him. Of course, this was to be taken as a boyish fancy, as generally children who have some ambitions agitating their hearts, naturally wish to be like some great man whom they meet in the course of their boyhood days. But there is significance in every little bit of experience and every contact that comes to us in our lives. Ramdas used to go for the Darshan of this Swami two or three times everyday and he felt that the Swami was exerting on him a strange but powerful fascination.

Among Ramdas' near relations there was also an aunt who was deeply religious. From the time of her eldest son's death she had lost all attraction for the worldly life, with the result that she was engaged in intense devotional practices, such as repeating God's Name constantly, singing songs composed by saints, listening to the reading of scriptures, and attending Harikathas (narration of stories from the scriptures) performed by itinerant devotees and saints. Whenever a saint came to Hosdrug she would regularly attend his or her discourse on religious topics. The contact of this devout soul had indeed greatly influenced Ramdas' career.

The saints and devotees that came to Hosdrug from time to time were spreading the glory of Bhakti and the power of God's Name. Ramdas also joined the elders in attending the Satsangs.

Boyhood Characteristics

Whenever there was a cause for his being fed up with school life, and when in the home he could find no peace, Ramdas would resort to his favourite haunt—the old dilapidated fort of Hosdrug. The silence, solitude and cool shade of the trees in the fort would provide him with a quiet and elevating environment, and he would freely wander within its high walls. In this fort there was a small ancient temple and Ramdas, in the course of his wanderings, would hover round this temple in a state of abstraction under the spell of the serene beauty of Nature. The cluster of trees full of foliage, the deep, small wells, the verdant pastures on which cattle grazed, the tinkling music of the bells around their necks, the azure sky above with its infinite expanse, the tall banyan trees from whose heights he could view the panoramic landscapes, and the nearby sea dazzling in the sunlight—all these sights would fill his heart with an inexpressible joy and peace. He would lose all account of time and space. After a few hours he would reluctantly return home or to school, which provided an unpleasant contrast to the inspiring atmosphere of the fort.

God works indeed in His own mysterious ways to awaken man from the drab life to which he is bound by the cramping rules and regulations that seek to suppress the free, spontaneous and joyful outflow of his nature.

Such an awakening was not revealed in him in any definite and distinct manner. Yet there were clear indications of it when he craved for freedom and inwardly rebelled against the enforced limitations set on him by home, school and society. Even at that period of his life, the life of a child, free as it is from all social conventions and restrictions, charmed him so much that he loved to be always in the company of children. He enjoyed a rare ecstasy when he fondled and played with them. If there was a baby at home, he would return from school or from his games with eager longing to see it and fondle it. This has been true also of his later life.

Another characteristic in him was that in those days he took a great liking to climbing trees, swinging on the long roots that hung down the branches of the banyan trees and skipping from branch to branch of the line of these trees in front of his house. In fact, there were two long avenues of banyan trees on the broad road facing his home, leading towards the sea on its southern side. He had a light, supple and active body.

Another factor he could very well remember was that there was in him not the least ambition for any worldly position, benefit or reward. In school, children usually aim at a pass in the examination and expect an applause from their chums. At home they expect a word of praise from the elders for their successes or clever and wise ways. But in Ramdas such a desire was totally absent.

He had a great leaning towards art, for it was his inborn talent. So his love of Nature created in his mind images of the objects that he saw, and there was the urge for reproducing them on paper. Drawing pictures of persons and other objects was his favourite hobby. He had also a penchant for clay modelling. He was found indulging in these pursuits whenever he was otherwise expected to be revising his lessons or doing any homework. This of course brought on him a shower of scoldings and upbraidings. From the above it is clear to the reader that Ramdas' life was revolving around three main yearnings, namely, to remain a child forever, loving children and playing with his fellow-mates; to commune with Nature in silence and solitude; and to engage himself in works of art.

The Principle of Non-injury

Now a stage was reached in his life when he was to be invested, according to custom, with the sacred thread. He and his brother were given the thread together and a celebration was held in the house on this account. This investiture is to mark a new birth in the life of a growing child. It is the sign of life verging on boyhood. The thread ceremony is an initiation into the spiritual life. But in Ramdas' case the sacred function was marred by an untoward incident that deprived the ceremony of its moral and spiritual meaning and aim. All the same, one

thing it did produce in his mind, and that was that the object of life was to dedicate it to God. This idea remained in his mind and made itself evident whenever he saw any saints and attended worship at home or in temples. He began to understand and hold on to the principles of right and justice according to the accepted ethical standards. He formed a code according to which he wished to conduct his life, and this code was that he should be the least harmful to others and offer his love towards all. For the practice of this principle, he knew that a strictly moral life was essential. He tried his utmost to avoid his being a source of trouble, worry and pain to others. Sometimes, though not directly helping others to achieve happiness for themselves, he was indirectly affording opportunities to them to gain whatever they wished to have on which they had set their minds. After he grew in years, his aspiration to be a giver of happiness to others became more and more pronounced.

Besides Harikathas, he used to attend country dramas performed in the paddy fields, and celebrations in temples, and go with the devotees when the temple God was taken on the main road in procession.

In spite of his not having shown proficiency in his primary and secondary courses of education, Ramdas was sent away from Hosdrug to Mangalore for his higher studies. By this change he was a gainer in two

matters. In the high school there was no corporal punishment, and then again the rigid and harsh home discipline was also not there. He was taken to a bigger place than the small village of Hosdrug. Mangalore was then considered to be a big town. Here he came in contact with a greater number of people of various temperaments. He watched and observed keenly the new surroundings in which he was put. His indifference towards school studies continued as before. However, he conceived a thirst for general knowledge, gained either by practical experience or through the reading of books. He scarcely mixed in the company of other boys. He eschewed all games. He stood aloof and watched the world-play, living a life of his own, all centred in one longing to gain all that he could gather from the life which had come to him in the new place.

At school, teachers loved Ramdas although he was the most backward in the class. His classmates also had affection for him although he did not contact friendship with them or move in their company. His attitude towards both of them was strangely distant and very often indifferent. He passed no examinations and this was true even in his primary and secondary courses of study. He never read the textbooks or attended any lessons in the class. By some teachers he was considered as a pupil who was there in the class only to fill a place on the bench.

Then how did he spend his time? He became a voracious reader. He used to read book after book from the school library. What first attracted him was fiction stories and novels.

First Religious Influences

One incident stands out predominantly in Ramdas' life at Mangalore. About two and half miles from the town there is a small hillock which goes by the name Kadri. On this hill there are a temple, seven tanks and a Math belonging to the Nath sect, and also several caves. The temple observes an annual celebration during which thousands of devotees gather in it. Fairs are held and there are also various amusements. Once, Ramdas, along with other boys of his age, attended this festival. In the course of his wanderings in the vast congregation of people and in the midst of the various stalls and crowds of pilgrims, he came upon the gateway of the Nath Math. The gate was a small structure having two verandahs on either side. On one of the verandahs the huge figure of a Yogi was seated in Yogic posture, his head with matted locks bent, resting on his chest, eyes closed, two hands crossed over his thighs, absorbed in a state of trance. The body was as still as a stone image. This sight raised various kinds of emotions in Ramdas' breast. He gazed on this still and silent figure for some time and, even after leaving him, Ramdas returned to be

in his presence, his eyes transfixed on the Yogi. He learnt from the grown-up devotees who had come to see him, that he was a great Yogi. They said that he was found in that posture for the whole day. His name was Sundernath.

Then again, during his stay in Mangalore, he had occasions to come in contact with wandering Sadhus and Sannyasins. There was an almshouse near the Ganapati temple at one end of the Ganapati Temple street. Here, when passing the street, Ramdas used to stop awhile to have Darshan of these itinerant Sadhus. Invariably he found them seated before a fire in mere *kowpeens* and bodies smeared with ashes. These sights used to enliven the latent spark that was in him and for a time make it burn brighter, revealing the glory of a life surrendered to the Divine.

Ramdas had from time to time the Darshan of the Swamis of the two major communities of Mangalore at that time, namely the Saraswats and Gowda Saraswats.

Home life in Mangalore was, of course, a tame and smooth flow. The school afforded him only opportunities to silently study the natures of his classmates, teachers and others. His thirst for knowledge urged him to pore over the books of the school library one after the other with great eagerness.

In the class lessons there was one thing which he was intimately acquainted with, and that was the Bible. Of

course, the Bible was taught to him even in his elementary and secondary education. But the terror which the teachers inspired in him prevented his appreciating the beauty, the power and the glory with which the great scripture is replete. To hear the Bible lessons imparted with understanding and love produced a deep impression on his mind. The life of Christ as presented by his Apostles in the New Testament soothed his heart.

There was one teacher who was of a very benevolent nature. Ramdas used to love him more than the others. Goodness and kindness in the nature of a man would greatly attract him and draw him towards the person who possessed them. He disliked every kind of tyranny, force, injustice and harshness. His idea of God was never a God of wrath who chastised those who sinned against Him. The definition "God is love" charmed him. The old Bible of the Christians, and the ancient religion of the Hindus in several parts of it, depicted God as a God of retribution, who cursed those who acted contrary to His commands. Ramdas knew the power of the Bhakti cult of the Hindus and the teachings of Buddha and Christ. All these presented before us a God who is compassion, kindness and forgiveness. To trust Him means to be entitled to His Grace, and this Grace frees us from all hate, anger and lust and converts us into His likeness.

Ramdas had now begun to understand clearly the

meaning and purpose of human life. This great ideal of God as love fired his heart and was slowly influencing his life.

Leadership Traits

In his school career Ramdas was a complete failure. He spent a year in Udipi where he joined the local high school. Here he used to frequent the great Krishna temple established by Madhavacharya. He came to know the amazing story of how the image of Krishna took a right-about turn for the sake of His ardent devotee, Kanakdas.

Here, in the company of friends who all thought alike, was formed a brotherhood with the aim of creating a harmonious feeling among all classes of people, first in South Kanara and then to extend it beyond its borders. Lectures were held and prominent people of the place were invited to attend the meetings. It was, of course, a boyish venture. But it indicated in what direction the heart moved and what was there in it in seed form which was to grow as days went by. The brotherhood, however, had a short-lived existence.

Ramdas returned to Kasaragod with the ostensible object of preparing for the final examination. He lived with a generous and kind-hearted uncle who had a big library of religious books, principally those of the Theosophical Society. During the period of preparing

for the examination he engaged himself instead in reading books from the uncle's library. The works of Madamme Blavatsky and Dr Annie Besant gave him an insight into the mysteries of the various co-religions, especially of Hinduism.

At this period of his life, he had heard of the great saints—Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda—but as yet he had not had any introduction to the teachings and lectures of the great saints and outstanding luminaries of the day.

Naturally, not having prepared for the examination, he did not pass. He returned home and the idea of prosecuting his studies was abandoned as his parents found that Ramdas had no heart in school education. He wished to be an artist—not for the sake of earning his livelihood, but to give free vent to that inborn talent which was seeking expression within him. Even in those days he was doing all things for the sake of the joy that any work would yield him. He proposed to his parents that he would go to Bombay to join the Arts School there. Of course, there was opposition as he was found to be at that time too young to proceed to a distant and strange city where there was hardly anybody to take care of him. But the call of freedom was insistent. One day in the afternoon Ramdas started and left home with the view of going to Bombay. He ran on and on only to be sent back from Kasaragod by his uncle the next day

in a bullock cart. So his venture ended in an awful defeat. Just like a bird fluttering its wings in the cage for liberation, so his soul was struggling to get away from all cramping influences and live a free life in the open, unchartered spaces.

Father was a kind-hearted person. Understanding the feelings and aspirations of Ramdas, he encouraged him in a venture proposed by friends in Hosdrug to start an amateur drama society. Ramdas was the prime moving figure in this new undertaking. He used his artistic talents in preparing screens, dress and other requirements of the drama performances. The society first staged a part of an English drama and then, as desired by the people of the village, it staged the drama of Shivaji. In this drama, as there was nobody to personate Shivaji's Guru, Samarth Ramdas, the part fell to Ramdas. He was new to acting and there was absolutely no training available from anybody who was proficient in that art. Still the drama was a grand success, and it was said that Ramdas did his part creditably. He remembers how he appeared on the stage in the robes of a Sannyasin with a *kamandal* (water-pot) in one hand and a Japa *mala* (rosary) in the other, wooden sandals on his feet, his forehead besmeared with ash and his head adorned with matted locks. He sat in front of Goddess Bhavani's temple, facing the Goddess and offering prayers to Her. The scene is still vivid before

his mental vision. Ramdas was then about fifteen or sixteen years of age.

The Panorama of Life

Now the scene of his life shifts. His parents decide upon sending him to Madras to stay with his brother to undergo a course in art at the Madras Arts School. Ramdas finds himself in Madras. He joins the School of Arts. For a time contact with anything that might inspire belief in God disappears. In a few months, the scene again shifts.

The great force that was guiding his life and leading it on took him to the far-off city of Bombay. In Bombay his life passed through various strange, shocking and convulsing experiences. He remained in Bombay for three years as a student in the V.J. Technical Institute. God's ways are inscrutable. The subject in which he had great interest and for which he had great love was given up and he had to come to Bombay to study another subject for which he had absolutely no liking. Still three years were spent, not with the object of gaining any pass or distinction in the Institute training, but in studying life in close grips, studying men with intimate touch and association, reading books from libraries which could provide any and every kind of book on any and every conceivable subject. He saw life in its highest heights and in its lowest depths. Bombay can provide every

human being who wants to learn what life is, with every facility for probing through and through into the very core of human existence and, if he is wise, he can derive the utmost benefit from such deep and abiding experiences.

During Ramdas' Institute career in Bombay, he, for most of the period, stayed with a friend who was employed in one of the firms of Bombay. This friend, though he was not a relation and though he belonged to a different community, had conceived a great love and affection for Ramdas. Ramdas has seen brother loving brother, mother loving her sons, and friend loving a friend, but the love which this friend bore for Ramdas was something very rare. It can be compared to all the love of these three persons and much more. There was not a day when he returned from his office without a great longing to see Ramdas. As soon as he entered his rooms, the first thing he would do was to enquire where Ramdas was. Only after seeing him would he attend to his other affairs. Whenever he got anything for himself, he would also get the same for Ramdas. There is a relationship termed "Platonic love", and this love was of that nature.

Ramdas, for his part, reciprocated that love with the same ardour and intensity. This was proved by a sad event that took place towards the close of his three years' study at the Technical Institute.

Adventures in English Literature

It was through this friend that Ramdas had access to all the great works of English writers through a well-known library which was a depository of countless books on various subjects. Ramdas started reading historical books first, then he took to the study of English poetry. He felt he should possess some books of such poetry and resorted to second-hand bookstalls so that he could buy books sold at cheap rates. English poets engaged most of his hours of the day. He simply revelled in the beauty and inspiration which their style and expression provided. Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Byron, Browning, Cowper, Wordsworth, Shelley, Southey, Tennyson, Keats—these were some of the poets for whom he had great admiration. From poetry he turned to philosophy. Burke, Carlyle, translations of Ruskin, Schopenhauer, Emerson and others became his favourites. He read them all with great avidity. But he could not find any suitable principles on which life could be safely founded though they did provoke thought and kindle an enquiry after Truth.

At this juncture he came across books published by the Rationalists' Press Association of America. The works of Ernst Haeckel, Grant Allen and others set his mind ablaze and the faith created and nourished during his childhood vanished at a sweep, and he turned into a sceptic. He felt that whatever he had read or heard from

the scriptures about God and His worship, belonged to mental hallucinations. God was merely an idea conceived in the human brain. In reality there was no God; Nature alone caused all movements, and the two had no relationship or connection with each other. Ramdas remembers the expression often used in this regard—"a fortuitous concourse of atoms". Everything happens by chance and there is no such thing as an immanent and over-ruling power that guides the destinies of all things. The scientific manner in which the Rationalists sought to prove that God did not exist, dashed his faith in God to pieces. He wished to enroll as a member of that Association so that he might be able to read all its latest publications and keep himself up-to-date in the formulation of his thoughts and ideas regarding the scientific viewpoint and outlook advanced by this Association.

It is no doubt easy to slip from faith in God to atheism; the path being downward and slippery, the time taken for the change is short and quick.

His reading of books did not stop at this stage. He went on and on reading more and more books. The Greek philosophers, Roman orators, German and French dramatists, American and English humorists, and books on crime and detection, and the masterly novels of authors of various countries, in the original or in translations, absorbed all his attention during his

spare hours. In fact, he devoted only a very small part of his time towards the Institute studies.

When the mind was perfectly arid and the thought of God repellent to it, when peace and equanimity lost their charm for him, in some mysterious way he came upon the works of Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Rama Tirtha. The words of Swami Vivekananda, resonant with the throb and thrill of his intimate experience of God-revelation, followed by a loud and insistent call from the darkness of non-belief into the light of living faith, his tremendous renunciation and the great spiritual power which gave him strength to carry the message of Vedanta across the seas to distant lands where he delivered the message of our Rishis in a voice that actually reverberated through the entire world—all these made Ramdas' heart fertile again, and the faith which had wellnigh become dead and gone, revived again and grew up with such rapidity that there was a total transformation within him from the life of negation to the life of positive assertion with regard to the existence of God. The experience, of course, was not there, but faith took deep root in him and he knew that no blast, however powerful, could any longer uproot and destroy this faith that came to him.

However, he became a radical believer. The ceremonial and ritualistic side of religion failed to appeal to him any longer. His ideal was a spiritual life built upon a sure

and pure foundation of a strictly moral life and action. The idea of caste and creed vanished from his mind. He believed in a God who is the father of all members of the human race. God is universal, the divine source of all that exists. His heart bent before such a God.

Henceforth, he concentrated his mind upon the study of Hindu and Christian scriptures. He read the translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This great scripture cast a spell upon him. He could even then get from it flashes that illumined his heart although most parts of it did not reveal their secrets to him.

In the Presence of Death

The selfless friendship with the person with whom he stayed, combined with the new faith that he had gained, brought him strength and peace at heart. He felt that he was groping all along to find a light that would guide him through life to some great goal. That light now seemed to glimmer in his heart.

True religion, he came to know, consists in the practice of unselfish love towards all beings of the earth. He came to understand that God is not a God who dwells somewhere in a far-off heaven, but dwells with us and in us in this work-a-day world. Ramdas' interest in the affairs of the world had been lukewarm from the start of his life, but when his life took a new turn in Bombay, this interest cooled down still further.

One or two months before Ramdas' final examination in the Technical Institute, the friend who was all love and kindness to him and under whose loving care and affection Ramdas spent his years in Bombay, had a severe attack of typhoid. His mother, two wives and some other friends were in his house at the time. When his condition began to deteriorate, he did not wish that any of his relations should go to his room except Ramdas and the doctor. Medicines and food were given to him by Ramdas as he would not accept them from the hands of others. Ramdas used to be with him almost the whole day. He stopped going to the Institute during these days. Till then Ramdas had not been near any person at the last stage when life was going out of the body. Ramdas did not leave the friend's bedside and he saw how gradually the disease was gaining the upper hand and wringing out his life. Ramdas' heart was of course very heavy with grief. The last day was a memorable day for him. The body of the friend became stiff and he could take neither medicine nor food. He was lying on his back, motionless. His eyes were fixed and from the throat a continuous hiccup was issuing. Ramdas watched him the whole night till life departed in the early hours of the morning. Here Ramdas found himself directly in the presence of death.

When death claimed the friend, Ramdas' heart was agitated with great sorrow. He started crying like a child

which had lost its mother. In fact, some years later he lost his mother, but the pain of that loss was not as severe as this. For two days, whenever Ramdas remembered him, he was off and on crying from the sudden separation of this friend. The impression which this sad event left on him deepened his indifferent attitude towards the high aims and ambitions of this transitory earthly life.

When circumstances force the soul to turn to its immortal, changeless existence, full of light, peace and joy, it gets now and again glimpses of this supreme state, just as one gets flashes of light from the sun for a brief period whenever the clouds that cover it pass on.

Marriage

The scene now shifted to Madras. Ramdas' stay in Bombay came to a close and he returned to Madras. Then followed a series of events in his life during which the experiences that he went through strengthened his belief in the all-loving God and increased his disgust for make-believe religion and hypocrisy. He became an uncompromising cynic when he saw sanctimoniousness or pretended holiness or saintship.

Ramdas' stay in Madras was only for a few months. He was restless and dissatisfied with everything that he beheld and every situation in which he lived. At this juncture a proposal was made to him of marriage. He

stood resolutely against it. Then he went to a place in the Hyderabad state on a job. Life flowed here smoothly for some time. He worked in the mills like an automaton. He had no taste for the work; he was carrying on only because he was put to it. Here, he one day received a wire from his parents deciding his marriage.

Marriage is considered to be a sacrament. It is to bring about the union of two souls so that they can walk hand in hand, as it were, on the path that leads to Divinity. But this significance is nowadays completely absent in the alliance of the two persons brought about by the ceremony or ritual of wedlock.

In Ramdas' case the marriage was not a success as he fully expected it. But that life gave him an experience which was needed for the complete understanding of life and its implications. Just as the harmonious mingling of two souls provides us with opportunities to realise the beauty of life, so also the constant friction between two souls removes all the dross that covers the soul so that it may appear in all its nakedness before the Great Being from whom it has manifested.

A Faithful Dog

When he returned, of course single, after the marriage to the place where he was employed, he brought with him a dog whose affection and faithfulness for Ramdas was phenomenal. Some religions say that an animal has

as complete and as great a soul as a human being. The comradeship of this dog relieved greatly the pressure that his life was exerting on him due to the unsympathetic attitude of his employers and the hard work which he had to perform in the mills. This faithful friend used to await him half-way from his quarters beneath a tree as he was asked not to proceed beyond it towards the mill buildings. When he saw Ramdas approaching, he would jump with joy and Ramdas would embrace and fondle him on meeting.

The workmen in the mills had unstinted love and respect for Ramdas, but the position in which he was placed was such that there was no possibility of a more intimate contact with them. Ramdas' heart actually bled for them when he saw them working about sixteen to seventeen hours a day. The injustice and cruelty that attended them and the work exacted from them entered the iron into his soul. In all matters relating to the relationship between the employer and the employed, he sided with the employed. The owners of the mill finally found that Ramdas' services were no longer needed, so he left.

Freedom From Fear

The next place where Ramdas found himself was Gadag. Here he learnt some lessons which he cannot easily forget, for they contributed greatly towards his

probing deep into the human heart and its workings. Here again he was among a large mass of toiling humanity. The employer was of an aristocratic type and had no sympathy for the sufferings of the workers. Whenever an accident took place as a consequence of which a mill worker had to suffer, Ramdas used to take him immediately on a stretcher to the nearest hospital and wait on the doctor until he had him treated in the proper manner. On these occasions he used to leave the mills without any permission from anybody. This attitude of his and the uniform kindness towards all workers made him popular amongst them.

On one occasion a misunderstanding arose in the minds of a big group of Maharashtrian workers. It is a well-known fact that Maharashtrians are a warlike people, brave and easily roused. Some among them took a vow to handle Ramdas roughly. The report came to him, but some inner feeling of assurance and strength made him fearless. With firmness and fearlessness Ramdas faced the group of Maharashtrians who had assembled at the gate of the mill with *lathis* in their hands. Somehow they were disarmed when they saw Ramdas standing before them with a smile on his face, offering himself to be thrashed by them. They could not do anything.

The above incident went to prove that Ramdas had no fear of death. When he came face to face with it

during the last moments of his friend in Bombay, it had given him the knowledge that besides the body there is something immortal in us which does not perish with the body. Or it might be that this consciousness was latent in him even before that experience. It is not that Ramdas had in his childhood no sense of any fear occasioned by bizarre and frightful stories he listened to or read, but as he grew up, this childish fear left him. Now he had passed from boyhood into manhood. He had seen life in its various aspects. The latent consciousness of the immortal within him was making itself felt and revealed.

The Drama of Life

One other outstanding feature during his stay in Gadag was this. A few friends proposed to go to Hubli to attend a drama performance which had a religious significance. Ramdas joined them. He reached Hubli and found himself sitting in the gallery witnessing the drama.

For this drama the proprietors had invited the famous Sri Siddharudha Swami of Hubli. Here Ramdas must say something of his contact with this great Siddha some years before.

Ramdas had an occasion to visit Hubli in quest of a job. Here he met an old friend who was deeply attached to Sri Siddharudha Swami and was practically living

with him in the Math. This friend took Ramdas one morning for Darshan of the great sage who was then on a visit to a nearby village. Ramdas saw him, touched his feet and sat beside him for about three quarters of an hour in the midst of a vast assemblage. A devotee of his was delivering a discourse on some religious topic. What he felt in the presence of Sri Siddharudha, Ramdas cannot clearly explain here. However, he does remember that he was strangely attracted towards him. The friend, before he took Ramdas to the saint, had described him as a great Mahatma who had the full vision of God. Ramdas received this view with an open mind and on seeing the Mahatma he felt that what the friend had told him was true. That was the first contact.

Now, from the seat in the third-class gallery, Ramdas could have a view of the Mahatma sitting in the front row on a specially prepared seat. Ramdas could see only his back and the red silk turban which he wore. The atmosphere was peaceful and vibrant with tranquillity. Ramdas never expected that the subject of the drama which he witnessed would be of such a great spiritual import. Here was staged a vivid life drama picturing the redemption of the soul from the clutches of the gross passions and cravings of the lower human nature. The story of the drama runs as follows:

In the kingdom named Human Body there ruled the king Manoraj. He had a wise minister called Viveka

(discrimination). So long as he was carrying on the affairs of his kingdom under the advice of his wise minister, all went well. But in course of time, six men, posing themselves as friends, attached themselves to him. These were Kama, Krodha, Lobha, Moha, Mada and Matsara (desire, anger, greed, attachment, pride and jealousy). These six friends took the king away one by one into various places where he would fall into the clutches of the worst vices. Whenever any one of these friends was instigating the king to follow him and lead a life of vice and degradation, the wise counsellor, Viveka, would intervene and whisper into his ears not to be influenced by that friend as he would only bring ruin and disaster to him. The king, having already fallen under the spell of his evil companions, would discard the advice with a shrug and a look of dislike towards the minister and follow the evil friends.

The first friend, Kama, takes him to a brothel where he undergoes the most humiliating experiences. The second, Krodha, takes him to a wine shop where again he meets with unhappy situations. The third, Lobha, guides him to a gambling den where he loses all his wealth and is turned out from it. Similarly, he is taken by the other friends also to other places of vice.

On every occasion, when he was falling from one state of ignominy and misfortune into another, his wise counsellor was by his side giving warning and advice

which the king did not heed. Whenever he was found helpless outside these houses of ill-fame, lying sometimes on the road or in the gutter, the minister would lift him and take him to the palace and restore him to his normal consciousness and health. He used to nurse him with all care and love. This went on for some years.

The wileful nature of the six friends of the king, who were veritably his six foes, their noble bearing, the distressed appearance of the minister who stood to the last by his king, and the abject surrender of the king to the influence of the passions represented by the six instigators, into sin and crime, were all so vividly pictured on the stage that one could very well see how in human nature these six evils create havoc, driving a man from righteousness to unrighteousness, from goodness to evil, from a life of honour, peace and harmony to a life of degradation, discord and chaos.

At last Viveka triumphs. The six evil ones lose their control over the king. He awakes, as it were, from a long nightmare.

The last scene was indeed thrilling. The screen falls once for all over the dark period of the king's life. A new scene full of light, power and hope slowly rises, revealing a most soothing and inspiring picture. The king is now seen standing erect, clothed in the robes of a monk, his face bathed in peace, and his attitude one of intense renunciation, his whole life turned entirely from the

world to God. The radiant figure of his minister, Viveka, is there by his side, standing with an enchanting smile on his face, which plainly expresses the great spiritual victory he gained over the low, grovelling passions which had overpowered his beloved king for a time. Slowly the king turns his gaze towards the minister and his face lights up with a strange glow of gratefulness and joy. The next instant he locks Viveka in his arms and presses him to his bosom in a loving embrace. While this reconciliation is going on, the six foes—we can rightly call them only as such—are seen at the arras watching the king from a respectable distance in his new garb. Their looks betray their fears that they can no longer approach the king. One is whispering to the other that their days of close intimacy with the king and their power over him are numbered. They suggest to one another that they would do well to depart and have not anything more to do with the king, as he would not brook their friendship, much less their very presence. Thus the drama ends.

The last scene as depicted above kept the audience in a tense emotional fervour. The actors had played their parts as if they were inspired. The presence of the great soul, Sri Siddharudha Swami, must have been responsible for the wonderful effect the drama produced on the audience and the wonderful way it was presented to them. This was the effect on the audience in general. But

how did it affect Ramdas? Ramdas saw a veil, as it were, lifted off before his eyes, revealing an illumined vista replete with divine peace, power and bliss. For a few seconds, Ramdas sat still like a statue. Then he came back to the body-idea and left the hall. The drama produced an abiding impression in the core of his soul.

Foreword

SWAMI RAMDAS OF Anandashram, Kanhangad, is called "Papa" by most of his devotees. Papa's book, *In Quest of God*, fell into my hands in Bombay, sometime towards the end of 1937, apparently quite casually. I started reading it as soon as I saw it; and in the train, while returning to Karachi, I went through it several times. Its style, its humour, and the incidents and experiences—it was a rare joy indeed! On my next trip to Bombay a few weeks later, still in 1937, I bought all his books and began reading *In the Vision of God* at once. This, too, I read several times and with the same feeling of joy, wonder and relief.

First Meeting With Papa

I met Papa at the end of January 1938 in Bombay with Sri V.G. Dalvi, in the house of Sri U. Sanjivrao, one Friday morning. As I was going, I kept wondering as to what my first experience was going to be. I had written to him a letter requesting him to come to Karachi; and he had responded immediately, saying that when he

decided to go on his travels again, he would include Karachi in his tour programme. The fact that his response had been immediate and that he had consented to come to me—well, I remember still the thrills it had sent into me and how I had left my college work and rushed to my brother, Principal S. B. Junnarkar, and thence to my house, just to communicate the wonderful news. "So, he is coming—and to *me*!" That is how I had put it to them at the time. "So, I am going to meet him now!" That was my feeling at Bombay as I was about to enter his room.

Seated on a raised cushioned seat, with a silken canopy over him, this almost naked Sadhu, of whose wanderings with wounded feet I had read in his books, looked all joy and peace. And as I touched his feet with my forehead, he got up, came down and embraced me. My God! I was simply struck with wonder. A being who, judging by all the canons I had read of, had realised God—that is, had become one with Him—to go through this human act! But my mind ceased to work. I sat down and stuck to the place; I accompanied him wherever he went that day and left him late at night, listening to whatever fell out of his mouth and noting everything that happened. His smile was grand. His explanations—well, these I had known in his books. The singing of Ganesh Heblekar, wherever we went, sent me into raptures. I had known Sufistic songs of the

sadness of separation. Ganesh, the Ashram nightingale, sang of the joy of union. A very new experience it was.

The next day I met Papa late in the evening and left him again after midnight. The following day was a Sunday and I was once more with him in the morning and left him on Monday night, just in time for the train to Karachi. But the experience of that Sunday night, passed at Santa Cruz in the house of Sri Mukund M. Thakore, now principal of the Ahmedabad Law College, is unforgettable. The whole night really—literally the whole night, till we got our tea or coffee in the morning—this Sadhu kept us roaring with laughter by his vivid, humorous descriptions of some of the incidents described in the book, *In the Vision of God*. In making us laugh at the attachments of the companion of his travels, Ramcharandas, he made us laugh at ourselves and put us, that way, on the road to freedom from them. A fine, subtle way of opening our eyes without the feeling of a hurt!

God of Retribution or God of Love?

Well, I came back, and in the train I had time to think.

That the spiritual life must be a very sad and serious life, full of discomfort all along, that he who has chosen it must be going through spiritual discipline of the most strenuous type, putting a powerful brake on himself, here, there and everywhere, that he must not laugh, and,

if possible, he must put on a sombre if not weeping look (Is not the entire burden of this miserable universe pressing heavily on his head all the time?) is something that we in India, and perhaps elsewhere also, take for granted. That God must be very cruel—a terrible Being—has been accepted always. Some systems of religious belief have brought Him down to the level of a merely just Being, which they have done with the imaginary theory of Karma and rebirth, that reminds one of the wolf's story where "if you did not abuse me, your father must have done so" was what the wolf said to the lamb it wanted to devour.

Justice might be secured that way to the weak, unthinking mind. But it made God, after all, a God of retribution. Who would care for a God like that? That of all lives the spiritual one must be a life of sorrow and sadness, with no fun and joy, no humour, no joke—unbearable! And that you must, in order to reach Him, pass through desert places and steep inclines over dry, rugged mountains, cutting your clothes and skin with thorns and brambles, and must fast and look a fool—how can that be? Spiritual life must be a love-story full of fun and joy; and your passage to Him must be through sunlit glades and pastures, with sweet-singing birds and beautiful butterflies, fruits and flowers of fine smells and colours all along the paths, crossed by sparkling, murmuring rivulets. Why not?

Foreword

Swami Ramdas' bubbling with joy and freedom, his tender smile and look of infinite love and peace, his charming descriptions of incidents of the heroic type, his fun at us and fun at all things, and his absolute trust in God—these made it easy for me to believe what all my life I had longed to believe and privately did believe, and that was that God must be a God of love and joy, of fun and play. Self-surrender to a God of terror would be awful; to a God of justice and retribution, unpleasant; but to a God of love, it would be pleasing and easy—at least easily accepted. And this self-surrender is Papa's only condition for a truly spiritual life.

As for Sadhana, there are no baths and no fasts, no inconvenient rising up in the early mornings and, above all, no peculiar postures prescribed. You are free to do what you like according to your taste and temperament, but only repeat His Name, whichever you please, all the time of the day and night that you are awake, doing all things as they come along, in the style of a secretary, so that all the activities that appear to flow from you are, in reality, planned and controlled by the Old Man, whose shoulders are broad enough for all your so-called burdens.

Fine indeed! All sense of responsibility and the trouble it means, gone at one stroke! Papa has only one potent pill for all the ills of the body and the mind—the Divine Name of God. And it works!

Anandashram—the Abode of Joy

He stays at an Ashram, the Anandashram—"Abode of Joy"—as lovely as himself and his ways. There is only one condition for stay in that Ashram: there is a bell rung four times a day when, wherever you be, whatever you be engaged in you must drop and run to the dining hall for breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner; for the rest, you may go in for any study you like or for any Sadhana you please. You may pass your time with Papa himself and have your difficulties solved—though usually these solve themselves in the atmosphere of the place—or you may join the Bhajan that goes on twice everyday for an hour or so each time.

The place is beautiful, on the top of a hill, with a higher hill behind it, with the sea in front roaring at you in the monsoon season, fair fields and sloping grounds all around. Look where you may, all is beauty. To this restful place, many persons go, of all shades of opinion, belonging to all religions, from far and near—and all feel happy and return home convinced....

The devotees of Papa have had the natural curiosity to know some of the details of the life he lived before he entered the new one. One would be grateful really if every detail were available, of whatever kind, of the earlier life of a being like this—how and what he ate and drank, how he dressed, what games he played, what books he read, what his daily routine was, who his

playmates, friends, teachers and relatives were, what his subordinates and superiors thought of him, especially what his characteristics were in those early years, and what indications there were of his great future. This desire, I know, has been an expressed one and Sri Chandra Shekhar has, after all, tried his best to satisfy it to some extent. Sri Chandra Shekhar is Papa's sister's son and also his son-in-law; and this personal relationship has given an added charm to the narrative.

—N. B. Butani



Rukmabai and her child, Ramabai, Vittalrao
and Rukmabai's younger sister

—I—

By Way of Introduction

These are the Prophets of the world, the Messengers of life, the Incarnations of God... Whom else should we worship?

—Swami Vivekananda

"WHO IS A saint? A saint is he who has attained the Eternal, lives in the Eternal and has realised the Eternal. Call the great Reality by any name—the Eternal, God or Truth. Such a saint is a veritable blessing upon this earth. By his contact thousands are saved from the clutches of doubt, sorrow and death. He lives what he preaches and preaches what he lives. He awakens the sleeping souls to the awareness of their immortal and all-blissful nature. By his very presence he rids the hearts of people of their base and unbridled passions. A saint is the real redeemer and saviour of a fallen soul, for a saint is God Himself manifest in flesh and blood. The greatness of a saint is simply indescribable. We can only bend and bow to him and thus earn his ever fruitful benediction and Grace".

—Sri Swami Ramdas

Immeasurable is the debt of gratitude which our earth in travail owes to the saints and saviours who have appeared on it from time to time to succour suffering humanity; to save mankind from oppression, strife, agony and sorrow; to relieve pain and misery in the world and confer in their place the unique blessings of divine peace, cheer, joy and goodwill.

The history of the world is rich and replete with the everlasting contribution which these spiritual heroes have made to the religious, aesthetic and cultural life of the nations. These divine personalities have acted as beacons to the ailing world, and have spread the divine and universal message of peace, harmony, love and freedom. Their touch has healed and elevated. Their very presence has brought sunshine and joy. Their word has galvanised the low and the fallen into intrepid souls of lofty ideals. Their compassion is proverbial. For the sake of the miserable and downtrodden they have sacrificed themselves and staked their all to bring them speedy relief. These divine masters have left behind them an indelible impress of their beneficent influence on civilization. On the pattern of their lives nations have fashioned themselves. Their lives have been great self-luminous flares from which humanity has lit its own little earthen lamps of aspiration.

They have taught that man is essentially divine and that freedom from bondage and sorrow is his birth-

right. They have proclaimed that the supreme goal of Self-realisation is man's real and legitimate quest, and have set by their own lives the steps by which aspirants may ascend and attain it. The uplift of humanity in every sphere of life has been the supreme passion with these redeemers of mankind.

India is unique in being blessed, in as much as it has been the cradle of spiritual culture and a home of saints and sages ever since the dawn of history. Time and again our firmament has been lit up by luminaries of rare spiritual effulgence, who have shed their divine light and blessings on this sacred soil. Even in our own times we see around us a galaxy of these great saints. Some have come to be known to the world while others have shunned publicity and have remained unknown.

Saints are born as much as they are made. Some of these great souls show unmistakable signs of their divinity from their very birth. In the case of a few others, God's Grace has alighted suddenly, transforming and divinising them at once by a single contact with a saint or a God-man, like the base metal being transmuted into pure burnished gold. Valmiki is a classic example of this class. Others again have attained that high state of Self-realisation only through strenuous effort, untold suffering, severe and ceaseless austerities and a hard, rigorous discipline. Many of these have reached their later beatific state only after a prolonged, testing ordeal,

pursuing their supreme ideal with dogged determination, fighting the battle of life with dauntless courage, and finally emerging all-triumphant from the struggle.

These great souls, who have later in their lives attained the exalted state of divine illumination, apparently seemed to have lived an average worldly existence for a certain period. To all intents and purposes their lives do not seem to differ in any way from ours. Life brings to them in its train, joys and sorrows in equal measure as it does to us. Rather, life appears to treat them more harshly and unkindly than it does to us. Fortune rarely favours them; obstacles and frustrations dog their footsteps. Every moment of their lives is a struggle.

We ask: "In what special way do they differ from us ordinary mortals, that they alone should become God's chosen few? In what special way, more than ourselves, are they entitled to Divine Grace which immortalises them?"

But we forget that these are the heroes and supermen who have turned their very misfortunes into effective instruments to remove all obstacles and difficulties, whose one purpose and determination is, come what may, to reach the goal they have set before them, and who are ever ready and prepared to make the highest sacrifices, nay, to stake even their lives most cheerfully for the cause. To them defeat is unknown; hard knocks

of life do not cow them down; death holds no terror for them. How can it be otherwise than that the kingdom of heaven should be theirs? Though seemingly they appear as ordinary mortals like us, a closer study of their lives reveals them as men of exalted moral stature, immense courage, strong sympathies, warm hearts, and strong and earnest religious feelings and aspirations.

Naturally we have an interest in knowing the little details in the life of a saint, for there is as much for us to learn from his earlier worldly life as from his subsequent divine one. We like to know what outstanding qualities of head and heart fitted him out for his later spiritual life; how he met and overcame difficulties; what his outlook on life's little problems was and how he reacted to them. We like to know the course and stages of his spiritual development and all the factors that helped and contributed towards the final triumph.

Swami Ramdas, the subject of this sketch, who is hailed and revered as one of the greatest saints that modern India has produced, belonged to the world up to his thirty-seventh year during which he led a normal householder's existence. Yet an undercurrent of potential, spiritual greatness ran through the course of his worldly life, awaiting the most psychological moment to reveal itself. Subtly came on the change from the worldly life to the divine one. Slowly and gradually all the spiritual forces mustered strong and when the

supreme hour struck, they burst forth, transforming and sublimating his entire life and being. All the shackles which bound him to the world were cut asunder. The very life was now cast into a new mould, at once radiant, divine and universal.

Of his life divine, Swamiji has himself already written in his two autobiographical works of rare charm and inspiration—*In Quest of God* and *In the Vision of God.* But a large number of his admirers and devotees have evinced a keen and earnest desire to know more about his earlier life than they already do. This humble attempt to present a short biography of his earlier life is the result of their united wishes.

—2—

The Kanara Saraswats

But ye are a chosen generation.
—Holy Bible

THE KANARA Saraswats, better known as Chitrapur Saraswats, in order to distinguish them from other allied Saraswat communities, are one of the most advanced and highly intellectual communities of India. Although the census figure estimates them roughly at 15,000, they are widely scattered all over India and Burma. Pursuit of employment has carried some of the Saraswat families to even more distant regions like the Persian Gulf and South Africa. But the chief centres of this small community are the two Kanara districts—the North and the South—and the city of Bombay.

The Saraswats came from the Aryan stock. Tradition has it that they had their original home in Kashmir. Later, they migrated towards the south and settled down on the banks of the river Saraswati; and presumably it was from its association with this river that the community derived its name. At a still later period, they

wandered further to the south and settled down in Goa. When the Portuguese seized Goa in the year 1510, conditions became intolerable. The inquisition and religious persecution drove the community further to the south and they finally found their home in the two Kanara districts.

The Chitrapur Saraswats are Rigvedi Smartha Brahmins owing allegiance to the spiritual head of the Chitrapur Math at Shirali in North Kanara. This Math has been presided over by a succession of eminent and illustrious Sannyasins, well known for their high intellectual and spiritual attainments.

The mother tongue of the community is Konkani but it is not a written language and has no script of its own. It has a great similarity to Marathi, but it is not a dialect of the Marathi language, though apparently derived from the same parent stock. But Konkani has infinite capacity to absorb foreign words and it has undergone considerable change under local influences. The language of those living in Mysore and the Kanaras is largely interspersed with Kannada words, while that of those in the Bombay area with Marathi words. But Konkani as it is spoken today is a delightful mixture of all these three, in addition to a choice sprinkling from the English vocabulary, too!

The Saraswats are essentially an intellectual community and have for years been furnishing the government

offices with the cream of its manpower; it is only in recent times that it has ventured into industrial and business lines. It can claim with pride to have produced eminent judges, lawyers, high government officials both in the Indian Civil Service and in other departments, poets, philosophers, educationists and social reformers. The great saints, Appayya and Shantabai of Bhatkal, came from the Saraswats.

The Saraswats are a highly cultured people and educationally are considered advanced. The community takes its rank as first in the matter of education imparted to its boys and girls. Even years ago, when the educational system had not advanced as far as it has done now, the Saraswat women nevertheless derived their culture and learning from the Marathi lore and literature.

The one remarkable trait of the community is its enormous capacity to adjust itself to its environments. It holds advanced views on social reforms. Long before the National Congress took up the cause of the Harijans, it was a Saraswat of South Kanara, the late Kudmul Rangarao, known as Swami Ishwarananda, that started a movement for their uplift and amelioration, even at the cost of social ostracism.

And it was in this gifted community that Swami Ramdas took his birth in 1884.

—3—

Ancestry

Land of my sires! What mortal hand
Can ever untie the filial bond
That knits me to thy rugged strand?
—Sir Walter Scott

FORTY-FIVE MILES to the south of Mangalore, in the district of South Kanara, lies the little town of Hosdrug facing the Arabian Sea. Hosdrug or "Hosa-durga", meaning in Kannada "a new fort", owes its name to the fort then newly built by a commander of the Ikkeri Kingdom about three hundred years ago. This town lies on the South Indian Railway network but its station is known as Kanhangad. Anandashram, the holy abode of Swami Ramdas, lies further inland at a distance of approximately two and a half miles from this town.

About the late seventies of the last century, three or four Saraswat families had settled down in the town of Hosdrug. Of these, we are immediately concerned with two, namely, the Trikannad and the Padukone families.

Trikannad Ramarao was a *monegar* or revenue inspector in the government service, a position which in those days brought him much influence and respect. He had two sons and four daughters. The head of the other family was Padukone Shamarao, who had retired from government service and had settled down in Hosdrug with his eldest son, Balakrishnarao. Both these families were held in high esteem and affection by the local people. Both families lived in perfect concord with each other and before long, they were knit together by a further bond of marriage between them. Lalithabai, the third daughter of Trikannad Ramarao was given in marriage to Balakrishnarao, the eldest son of Shamarao.

Life in those days was beautifully simple. The modern luxuries and amenities were unknown. The railway had not yet made its appearance and journeys from one place to another had to be done by bullock cart. Human wants were few and a rupee had a far higher value in the economic life of the people than it has now. Modern civilization had not crept in, which has since destroyed in its wake the sylvan simplicity of men and women. The villages were self-sufficing units and young men had not yet begun their migration to towns and cities in quest of livelihood. The main occupation was agriculture and life was then much more prosperous than it is these days. In brief, it

was a transitional phase between the old and the new India.

The two families, Trikannad and Padukone, were profoundly religious in their outlook and strictly followed the Bhagavat Dharma. The mornings would be spent by the menfolk in ceremonial worship of the family Deity. In the afternoons, when men were at their different avocations, the women of the two households would gather together and the *Puranas* would be read out and translated by one of the elderly members of the assembled group. In the evenings, the young and the old would again gather together and sing Bhajan for a couple of hours.

The most important festival of the year was the celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi. The children in the family looked forward to this annual event with special interest and eagerness. All the members of the household from far and near would gather together for the occasion and there would be much feasting and a spirit of camaraderie would reign all around.

Shamarao lived up to a ripe old age of ninety and, in the later period of his life, lost his sight. Yet, until about a couple of months prior to his demise, he would himself perform with clocklike regularity the elaborate worship of the family Deity. The writer still remembers the tall gaunt figure of Shamarao feeling his way through the house to the sanctuary where the Deity was

installed, and doing the worship unaided, despite his blindness and old age. He passed away in the year 1910, full of years and loved by his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Befitting his life, his end came most peacefully and at a most auspicious hour, too. It was a Monday and an Ekadashi at that—a day held most sacred by the Hindus. Balakrishnarao, his eldest son, was at his usual evening Bhajan together with three of his youngest children and a grandson, and it was to the tune of the sweet and sacred Name of the Lord that Shamarao's earthly life came to a close. Blessed death indeed!

Shamarao's wife, Durgabai, had deceased a few years before him. She was a simple and lovable soul. Although unlettered, she knew by heart hundreds of songs composed by the Maharashtrian saints, and she would sing them every evening in her own beautiful voice.

—4—

A Generous Uncle

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send.
—Thomas Gray

SHAMARAO HAD three sons and three daughters. The three sons were Balakrishnarao, Narayanrao and Devarao; the three daughters, Radhabai, Janhavibai, and Bhavanibai. Of these only the last two are, happily, still amidst us.

The youngest son, Narayanrao, lived only to the age of about twenty-five. He was, one might say, a born Avadhut. He took little interest in his bodily existence and was absolutely insensible to his surroundings. To all external appearances he looked extremely weak-minded and stupid. But he was meek and submissive. He was not permitted to go out of the house, and only a small length of thin thread tied to his arms or legs to a post nearby, sufficed to keep him at a place for hours together. The singing of Bhajans or devotional songs had the remarkable effect of rousing him from his

apparent stupor and, wherever he might be, he would like to be taken to the room where Bhajans were being sung; and during the singing he was always in a blissful and ecstatic mood. It is said that on a certain Shivaratri day he was seen actually rolling in a heap of ashes.

The second son, Devarao, was in government service in Coorg. Later he resigned his post there and set up practice as a lawyer at Kasaragod, a town fifteen miles to the north of Hosdrug. Soon he built up an extensive practice and became one of the leaders of the local Bar. Devarao was extremely liberal-minded, selfless in his outlook and generous to a fault. Anecdotes of his lavish charity are still current in Kasaragod in the circles in which he moved. He had no issue of his own but he loved and regarded the children of his elder brother, Balakrishnarao, as his own, and was financially of very great help to his brother. In fact, most of the latter's children owed their education to their generous uncle's bounty. Devarao was a good speaker and a good writer. He had a very keen sense of wit and humour which he, along with Balakrishnarao, had inherited in a large measure from their father. He was, like his father, tall in stature.

One of the daughters of Shamarao, Janhavibai, is a saintly soul. She has been intensely religious and spiritually-minded even from her childhood. Although she does not know how to read or write, she propounds

the great philosophic truths in so simple a manner and explains even the most difficult passages from the *Bhagavad Gita* and other scriptures so beautifully as to charm and impress her listeners. In her home at Kasaragod, until recently, a large number of ladies would gather around her in the afternoons to hear her expound to them the truths about God and matters of spirituality.

—5—

A Blessed Couple

Who God doth late and early pray,
More of his grace than gifts to land,
And entertains the harmless day
With a well-chosen book or friend.
—Sir H. Wotton

BALAKRISHNARAO, THE eldest son of Shamarao, began his official career quite early in life. He had passed the General Test Examination which in those days was the minimum qualification for entrance into government service. He joined the Sub-Registrar's Office at Hosdrug as a clerk on a petty salary of Rs.12 per month and it gradually rose to Rs.20.

As we have said already, Balakrishnarao married Lalithabai, the third daughter of Ramarao. Lalithabai was a pure soul, endowed with a sympathetic heart, a kindly disposition and a sweet, forgiving nature. Her bearing was upright and dignified and her countenance shone with austere nobility. She was a devoted partner to Balakrishnarao and a loving mother to her children.

Swami Ramdas has given us a brilliant portrait of this blessed couple, his parents, in *The Vision* (December 1934 issue) and this article has since been included in his later published work entitled *The Divine Life*. The writer cannot do better than quote what Swamiji himself says about his parents:

"Balakrishnarao's official career was marked by his unflagging application, zeal and sincerity. His harmless, forgiving and simple nature endeared him both to his colleagues and superior officers. But the beauty and greatness of his life lay in his relations with the outside world and with the family that grew around him.

"This divine couple, by their ideal life of householders, held up before the world an example as to how life in the world could be made supremely blessed and glorious. Selfless service at home and of the guests that poured into their house, was the keynote of their lives".

In those days, when trains from Madras used to run only as far as Cannanore, people from Mangalore going to or returning from Madras or other places in the south, on business or pleasure, had to make a halt at Hosdrug and then resume their journey to Cannanore by boats or to Kasaragod by bullock carts, as the case might be. To all these people Balakrishnarao's house offered ready and willing hospitality, and not a day passed without a guest or two being entertained. With his meagre means and a growing family around him, he



Sri Balakrishna Rau
(Gurudev)

could hardly make both ends meet. Yet he and his wife served their guests most cheerfully.

As Swamiji writes: "Except for about an hour or two of recess during the midday when Balakrishnarao would be at home, he was busy the whole day in the office. Before or after meal he would not fail a single day to sit up with his children for prayers and Bhajans for an hour. He would sing aloud in his own way, with over-flowing love and faith, the celebrated Marathi songs of the Maharashtrian saints and especially of the popular saint, Tukaram, who was his favourite. His children would join him in chorus whenever he sang the Names of God. After supper, until he went to bed, except of course when he was attending on guests, he would be absorbed in reading religious books".

One of his most favoured songs during the Bhajan was Saint Tukaram's song which began as:

(बुडलों भवसागरीं विटोबा । तारी रे दयाळा तारी रे कृपाळा ॥)

It meant: "O Vithoba, plunged am I in the ocean of Samsara (worldly life), save me, O compassionate one! save me, O kind one!"

The family Deity was Goddess Shanta Durga, but Balakrishnarao's Ishta Devata (tutelary Deity) was Sri Vithoba of Pandharpur.

"Sri Balakrishnarao's faith in the goodness of God

was firm and unshakable. In all moments of trials and losses, common to householders, he would rely solely on God for strength, patience and peace. He was a stranger to despair and despondency, to which even men of strong will in the world sometimes fall a prey".

One day, the thatched roof of the adjoining bathroom accidentally caught fire and his house, which also had a thatched roof, was in danger of catching fire, too. Balakrishnarao's friends importuned him to remove the household goods, or at least the family Deity, to a safer distance, before the conflagration spread to the house. But Balakrishnarao stoutly declined to accede to their entreaties.

"I refuse to remove anything from the house," he said. "Let us have faith in the mercy of Sri Shanta Durga. She will save us."

So saying, he went into the room where the Deity was installed and prayed there for a long while. The prayer was heard. The wind changed its course and the house was saved from disaster. It may be mentioned here that the entire town of Hosdrug ran to Balakrishnarao's help that day to quench the spreading fire, and thereby demonstrated the affection and esteem in which the local people held him.

Calamities one after the other befell Balakrishnarao. He lost one of his daughters, Umabai, in 1906 and his wife in 1914. Two more of his dear children passed away

in the eventide of his life. But the extraordinary fortitude and equanimity with which he bore all these repeated shocks filled his friends and relations with admiration and wonderment.

"Balakrishnarao possessed an unparalleled sense of humour and his witticisms are even to this day current among those who had the privilege of his society. One conspicuous trait in his character was his equal vision. He never asserted the false sense of authority either of a father over his children or of a master over his household. He was so simple and tolerant that he would talk freely and even play sometimes with his children".

In his later years his grandchildren became his boon companions. He threw himself like a child into their company, and delighted to entertain them with varied and endless anecdotes. In all matters he became their friend, philosopher and guide. Few grandfathers perhaps have commanded that fondness and affection from their grandchildren as Balakrishnarao did.

Balakrishnarao, quite unlike his father or younger brother, Devarao, was of a short stature. His countenance beamed with joy and his eyes sparkled with merriment. A good joke would make him burst out into boisterous boyish laughter.

Balakrishnarao led the life of perfect surrender to the Will of God. On his bed at night he would offer daily a silent prayer to God and then go to sleep. Like a child

free from cares and worries he would fall asleep within less than two minutes after laying himself down. Although he had a big family to support on his meagre salary, he was a stranger to worry of any description. For he knew that the burden was not his but the Lord's, and he lived up to his conviction.

He had a great love for art, and this gift was richly inherited by almost all his sons. He used to relate how fond he was of drawing pictures and making models of clay in his childhood, and how this aptitude for art was severely suppressed by his well-meaning father who thought that his son's future might suffer if he were allowed to indulge in this fancy of his.

Balakrishnarao belonged to an orthodox and conservative age but the opinions he held on some of the burning questions of the day were far in advance of his times. When one of his younger sons proposed to marry a girl from outside his own community, Balakrishnarao not only readily approved of the proposal but also most cheerfully sent his blessings to the couple.

"Sri Balakrishnarao's popularity with all classes of people in Hosdrug was truly marvellous. He had not a single enemy. He was kind, affable and friendly towards all, and everybody loved him for his frank, trusting and lovable nature. It was clearly evident in his life that his vision was not confined to his family and relations but extended to all beings and creatures alike. Verily, he

belonged to the race of saints and sages who possessed the vision of the universal brotherhood of man".

The union of Lalithabai and Balakrishnarao was blessed with thirteen issues—ten sons and three daughters. They were: Narsing, Anand, Ganesh, Sitaram, Lakshmidevi, Vittal, Sanjiv, Srinivasa, Umabai, Girijabai, Sunder, Dinker, and Shivashankar. Of these children, Ganesh, Sitaram, Srinivasa and Sunder among his sons, and Umabai and Girijabai among his daughters are, unhappily, no more.

And it is with the life of Vittalrao, the sixth child of this blessed couple, who is now known to the world as Swami Ramdas, that we are chiefly concerned here.

It will be related in some detail later how, in the course of time, Balakrishnarao was destined to become "Gurudev" or the spiritual father as well to his son Vittalrao.

—6—

Birth and Childhood

Whenever virtue subsides and vice prevails,
I come down to help mankind.
—Bhagavad Gita, IV:7

THE BIRTH OF Vittalrao took place at Hosdrug at midday on Thursday, 10 April, 1884. It was the day of the full moon and, what was even more significant, it happened to be the day of Hanuman Jayanti, that is, the birthday of Sri Hanuman, the greatest devotee of Bhagavan Sri Ramachandra. This happy synchronization seemed to prognosticate the great future that was in store for the child born that day to Sri Balakrishnarao and Lalithabai.

Raphael describes the Arians—those that are born between 21st March and 20th April—as having "very strong, forceful, dynamic, determined characters. Free children of Mars, they are self-reliant, energetic, courageous, impulsive, and impatient of control and restraint, being full of spirit, both physically and mentally. Arians are often brilliant conversationalists,

being witty, loquacious, magnetic and often prophetic; they are rarely dull or uninteresting". These great qualities held forth by Raphael proved too true of the child that Lalithabai gave birth to on that auspicious day.

For the benefit of those readers who are interested in astrology, the astral chart of Vittalrao's nativity is given below:

Ravi 12	Budha 5 Ketu 1	Shukra 1 Shani 1	Mandi
	Vittalrao's Horoscope		Kuja 7 Guru 5 Lagna
		Rahu 7	Chandra 6

The child was given the name Vittal, after Sri Vithoba of Pandharpur, the favourite Deity of Balakrishnarao. He was rarely subject to illness in his infancy. The one remarkable thing about him that people observed was the extraordinary lustre in his eyes. His father used to relate how a wandering Sannyasin who saw the child had predicted that a brilliant future was in store for him.

The child grew up into an active boy. By his winsome and vivacious ways he endeared himself to everyone in the house. When Vittal was about four years old, a famous astrologer of the place predicted that the boy would attain a very high position in life. As in those days the post of a Deputy Collector was supposed to be the highest status in official life that an Indian could aspire for, our imaginative village astrologer added that Vittal would one day become a Deputy Collector! On hearing this forecast, Shamarao smilingly asked his little grandson—he was called by the pet name of "Vittu" by all—what he would give his grandparents when he became a Deputy Collector. Immediately Vittal set the house in roars of laughter by his ready-witted reply, saying that he would give his grandpa a pair of earrings and his grandma a pair of anklets with silver bells!

Vittal has indeed, in his later life, attained not the petty Deputy Collectorship that the limited knowledge of the astrologer could foresee, but a position which is the envy of the Rajahs and Maharajahs and the ideal of thousands of seekers after Truth.

—7—

At School

Why did my parents send me to the school,
That I with knowledge might enrich my mind,
Since the desire to know first made men fools,
And did corrupt the root of all mankind?
—Sir J. Davis

VITTAL WAS admitted to the local school when he was about six years old. His teacher was a typical village schoolmaster immortalised by poet Goldsmith in his poem. He freely made use of the birch; and woe to the boy who incurred his displeasure!

Yet he was kind; or, if severe in aught,
The love he bore to learning was in fault.

He severely punished the boys who absented themselves from his class. He seemed to have an uncanny knack of finding out the boys in hiding and thrashing them back to school! Vittal was not overfond of his school or his books, and so came in for a large measure

of his teacher's wrath. He often played truant, but in vain did he hide himself in the bathroom or in the loft of the cow-pen, for his ubiquitous teacher was well aware of the favourite haunts of his recalcitrant pupil.

Vittal was full of animal spirits and mischievous pranks. His favourite pastime was climbing up tall trees like the coconut and banyan. In front of the house, running parallel to the garden was a long avenue of tall banyan trees. Vittal would climb up one of these trees and hop from branch to branch and tree to tree with the agility of a monkey for a furlong's distance before he got down. Another usual recreation with him was to execute successive somersaults. A merchant, whose shop lay on Vittal's way to the school, often invited the boy to perform this feat before him and presented him with a piece of jaggery after every performance.

Vittal's pranks sometimes sorely tried the patience of his parents and earned for him severe chastisement at their hands. But he always preferred being punished by his mother as he would always be sure of getting sweets from her after the punishment!

From his childhood Vittal was of a jovial disposition and a cheerful, carefree temperament. He knew not, even as a boy, what fear was. He loved adventure. But he held his school and his books in low esteem; arithmetic was the one subject he hated most heartily, and it remained his pet aversion even in the higher classes.

—8—

A Roving Scholar

For a jolly good book whereon to look,
Is better to me than gold.

—J. Wilson

YET, EVEN THOUGH his attention to his lessons was perfunctory, he was promoted to the higher classes without much effort every year, until he passed the Third Form, the highest class in the local middle school.

Vittal was sent to Mangalore for the high school course and he joined the Mission High School there. This school was at that time run by the Basel German Mission.

Vittal's high school career, too, was marked by his indifference to studies and supreme dislike for his textbooks. But he had cultivated a great thirst for general knowledge, and was for his age well-informed on most subjects. Although he refused to be crammed by the school curriculum, he became a voracious reader and read all the books of general interest on which he could lay his hands. At this time he developed a liking

for the literary works of the English masters. He obtained many of these books from the school library and elsewhere, and read them with great avidity. If he came across a good book he would sit up and read it through before laying it down, very often converting night into day. This taste for literature enabled Vittal to acquire even at so early an age a remarkable finesse and facility in his English style.

Describing this period of Vittal's life, his younger brother, Sanjivrao, observes in his reminiscences published in Volume III of *The Vision*: "His was a free spirit and found his joy more in the masterpieces of great English authors than in going through the dull routine of a schoolboy confined to his textbooks. His extensive reading made him a master of English. I had the peculiar good fortune of receiving letters from him ever since my boyhood and his superb English was at once the envy and admiration of people who chanced to read them.

"His intelligence even as a student was of a high order. Whatever he once read he made his own. While an average boy had to plod through the lessons, he never had to do this. He was a stranger to what in school language is known as 'cramming'."

Vittal was even then a good conversationalist and had inherited from his father an unequalled sense of wit and humour. He would raise, as he does even now,

roars of laughter from his listeners by the unique manner in which he related incidents from his own life or observation. As Sanjivrao puts it: "The humour always lay more in the narration of an event than in the event itself, and he knew it". He had also an innate talent for histrionics and mimicry. Whatever the situation he was placed in, for the time being it was the lighter side of it rather than the serious one that appealed to his keen sense of the comic in life.

Another trait noticeable early in Vittal was a spirit of stubborn independence. He refused to follow the beaten track but exercised his own independent outlook on life and things. His brother further writes of him: "Because a certain number of people had accepted a certain thing as true was no reason for him also to blindly accept it. He would discuss the matter in detail with his friends, the discussions, however, almost always leaving him unconvinced."

Vittal was in his youth as he has been ever since—extremely simple in his tastes and habits. Again, to quote his brother Sanjivrao: "Both as a boy and as a young man, he was extremely indifferent to his wardrobe. He would not mind what clothes he wore or how he wore them. Ever bright and cheerful, he did not care for—I might almost say that he defied—the world's opinion in this matter, or for that matter on any other."

As could be expected, Vittal lagged behind in his

studies. In due course the selection examination for the matriculation was held and the results were soon to be announced. Vittal was not quite hopeful of his success in it and he avoided meeting his headmaster, who was also the science teacher outside the classroom. But, unfortunately for him, one day a friend arrived from Hosdrug wanting to see the headmaster on some business and he requested Vittal to escort him to his place. The friend could not be disobliged, and most reluctantly Vittal accompanied him to the headmaster's house. After the preliminary talk, the headmaster enquired of Vittal if he knew how many marks he had secured in chemistry. This query from the headmaster sent shivers through his frame and made him very uncomfortable. Getting no reply from Vittal, the headmaster proceeded to draw in front of him a big circle with his finger and told his pupil that that figure indicated the number of marks he had obtained in his subject! The results were announced but Vittal's name was not on the list of candidates sent up for the examination. This failure, however, had little effect on him and left him absolutely unperturbed.

Next year, Vittal joined the Christian High School at Udipi. Here he appeared for the matriculation at the end of the year but was unsuccessful. He came back to his home at Hosdrug and, to quote his own words, "enlisted himself to the sublime profession of idleness"!

—9—

The Artist and Actor

Nature I loved and, next to Nature, Art.
—W. S. Landor

VITTAL WAS now sixteen years of age. He had no desire to appear again for the matriculation examination. His one idea now was to go to Bombay and secure some employment there. But his parents were averse to sending him to Bombay at so early an age. His repeated requests to be allowed to proceed to Bombay met with a blank refusal from them each time. Vittal bided his time.

One day, when his father was away at the office, Vittal suddenly appeared before his mother and told her of his resolve to go to Bombay; but before the poor lady could recover from her surprise and find words to protest, Vittal had already left the house and was running along the road leading to Kasaragod. The helpless mother called to her aid a fat servant boy who was standing nearby and instructed him to pursue Vittal, catch him and bring him back. But the boy was a

poor match for Vittal, who was a swift runner. Vittal had covered thus a distance of about four miles, hotly chased by the panting boy, when he came to the ferry. Luckily for him the only boat of the ferry was lying on his side of the bank and Vittal, jingling a few coins that he had in his pocket, beckoned the boatman to row him across the river immediately. He was on the other side of the river when the fat servant boy arrived at it. Vittal, seeing his pursuer helplessly gazing at him from across the river, danced in glee, cutting capers and making faces at him. Vittal thence continued his journey while the poor boy had no alternative but to return home and report the failure of his mission to his mistress.

Vittal soon covered the rest of the distance of eleven miles on foot and arrived at Kasaragod. He directly went to his uncle Devarao's house, as his sole object in going to Kasaragod was to seek his uncle's financial help for going to Bombay. Devarao was surprised at his nephew's sudden appearance but the nephew had no nerve to open the subject of his exact intentions. Thus three days passed by when, in the meanwhile, Devarao received a letter from his brother apprising him of the true nature of Vittal's escapade from his home. Devarao called his nephew to his side and kindly but severely took him to task for coming away in defiance of his parents' wishes. There were no trains running in those days. So Devarao engaged a bullock cart and,

instructing the cartman to take Vittal straight to his house at Hosdrug, packed his nephew off. Vittal returned home full of disappointment and chagrin and would not leave his house for some days as his friends were only too ready to rag him with uncomfortable questions relating to his supposed trip to Bombay and what he did there!

Plague had now broken out at Mangalore in a virulent form and the schools were temporarily closed. Many of Vittal's friends studying at Mangalore now returned to Hosdrug. The friends joined together and started the Amateur Drama Society. Vittal took a prominent part in the activities of the society. He painted three colourful curtains—the first of Sri Krishna with the flute, the second of a magnificent building, and the third of some forest scenery. Besides this, his services were requisitioned for preparing costumes and crowns for the actors.

There was an outhouse in Balakrishnarao's garden which went by the grandiose name of "bungalow". The rehearsals of the dramas were held in this outhouse. Altogether three dramas were staged by the Amateur Drama Society. The first to be staged consisted of some scenes from Shakespeare's *King John*. Vittal took a minor part in this drama. In another he played the role of a clown, and his superb acting brought the house down with resounding cheers and uproarious laughter.

The third drama dealt with the life of Shivaji, the founder of the Mahratta Empire, and Vittal acted the part of Samarth Ramdas, the great Maharashtrian saint and Guru of Shivaji. Who in the audience then knew that this boy, who acted the part of Samarth Ramdas so well, would years later become equally famous as another Ramdas and be regarded by hundreds of his followers in Maharashtra as the very incarnation of his great namesake!

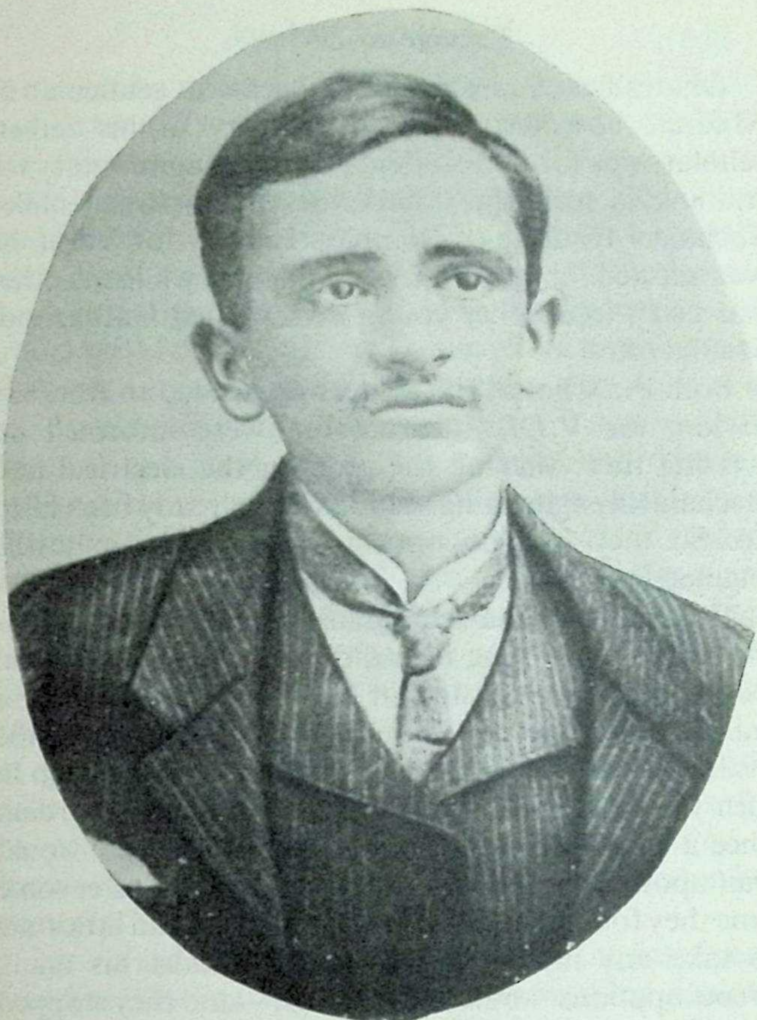
The activities of the Amateur Drama Society served to bring into prominent relief the considerable talent that Vittal possessed for art. Even as a student he evinced a great love for art and was fond of drawing caricatures of his teachers in the classroom. His parents now decided to send Vittal to Madras to take a course in Fine Arts in the School of Arts there.

—10—

Madras and Bombay

And remember that the best of friends must part. —*Anonymous*

IN DUE TIME Vittalrao came to Madras and settled with his elder brother, Sitaramrao, who was then employed as an inspector in the Passport Department. Vittal joined the School of Arts and took a course in drawing and engraving. The study of art was very much after his heart and he set himself to it with great zeal and earnestness. His progress was so remarkable that within a period of six months he attained a degree of proficiency in his subjects as would require an average student at least two years to reach. But the entire course at the Arts School was spread over a period of seven years; and even after this long and arduous course of study the future prospects in life that it held out were, as Sitaramrao later discovered, none too bright. So he did not favour the idea of his younger brother continuing further in the School of Arts. At this juncture a new opportunity for Vittal presented itself.



Vittalrao
(at 18)

Dhareshwar Sadashivarao. a Saraswat gentleman of Madras, now instituted, in memory of his father, scholarships for two students from his community for training in technical courses at the Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute of Bombay. Luckily for Vittal, he was selected for one of the scholarships, while the other was given to another young man named Hattiangadi Madhavrao.

Both the scholarship-holders proceeded to Bombay to join the V.J.T. Institute but were informed on arriving there that all the seats in the electrical and mechanical engineering sections had already been filled up. So they had no option but to take up textile engineering instead.

The donor of the scholarships was very particular that these two young men did not waste their time in Bombay. So he requested Sir N.G. Chandavarkar, who was then a judge of the Bombay High Court, to be the local guardian of the two scholarship-holders, who in turn were asked to report themselves to the guardian once a week. Accordingly, Vittal and Madhav would wait upon their guardian every Sunday. But after some time they found that Sir Chandavarkar found little time to take any interest in his wards amidst his many preoccupations—official and social—and they stopped altogether their weekly visits to their august guardian.

During the first two years of his stay in Bombay,

Vittal lived with his friend, Vadiraj, who was employed in a German dye firm. Vadiraj was a large-hearted soul and was so kind and loving towards Vittal that a warm and memorable friendship grew between them. Whenever Vadiraj bought new clothes for himself, he had the same done for Vittal also. During holidays Vittal would work in the laboratory attached to the office where his friend worked. Through him again Vittal received from the Petit Library a great many books that dealt with philosophy, religion, fiction and poetry. Vittal was now seized with a great passion for poetical and dramatic works. He read and re-read Shakespeare whose great dramas gripped his soul. He became a devoted student of the works of Burke and Carlyle. The writings and lives of Swami Vivekananda and Rama Tirtha captured his heart. At this time he also came across the literature of the Rationalists' Association of America. He read with eager interest Ernst Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe* and Grant Allen's *The Evolution of the Idea of God*. He developed a great liking for the publications of this Association and even desired to become its member. He applied for the membership but no reply was received.

Now a sad event took place. Vadiraj, the best friend that Vittal had and with whom he was staying all along in Bombay, fell ill and died. This calamity affected Vittal not a little. For days together it left him

disconsolate and grieving over the passing away of his dearest friend.

After the death of Vadiraj, Vittal shifted to the room occupied by his Institute friends, K. D. Nerurkar and Madhav. As was his wont, his application to his studies was indifferent. Yet when there was barely a month or two for the final examination, he sat up day and night to study his books and got through the examination with success. Thus at the end of the three years' course at the V.J.T. Institute, Vittal received his diploma in textile manufacture and came back to his brother Sitaramrao in Madras.

—II—

On the Threshold of Life

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn,
Good and ill together.

—Shakespeare

BETWEEN VITTALRAO and his elder brother, Sitaramrao, there existed a strong bond of mutual love, regard and affection. Both were endowed with similar characteristics and tastes. Sitaramrao was, like his brother, very courageous and daring, and stubbornly independent in his views. He had a great flair for art, literature and acting. With him, too, Shakespeare was a hot favourite. He wrote a bold and beautiful hand and his English style was graceful and charming. He was extremely generous and noble-hearted. Like Vittalrao, he also was very witty and humorous in his conversation. Thus, to the kinship of blood between the two brothers was added the affinity of temperaments.

Sitaramrao had just then started a hand-loom and soap-making industry in Madras when his brother returned from Bombay after the completion of his

course at the V.J.T. Institute. Vittalrao with his expert knowledge was now of immense help to his brother in putting his new industrial concern in a proper working order. The cloth turned out in the hand-loom factory was much appreciated by the public and even won some medals at exhibitions. But Vittalrao had little scope there for putting to practical use his three years' training in textile manufacture, as his services could be useful only in a power-driven cotton mill. About this time he received a letter from his father asking him if he was agreeable to marrying. Vittalrao sent an emphatic reply in the negative.

Soon after, he secured an appointment as spinning master in a cotton mill at Gulbarga. When Vittalrao had been there for three or four months, he received one day a telegram from his father apprising him of his proposed marriage. The alliance had been settled by his parents and now it only remained for the son to wire his consent. His mother, who was ill and practically bed-ridden for some years now, had already given her consent to the marriage on behalf of her son. Vittalrao wavered and hesitated for some time. To refuse once more, when events had advanced so far, would have been regarded by his parents as landing them into disgrace. Even the date for the marriage had been settled upon, in anticipation of his consent. Finally, Vittalrao yielded and wired back his consent.

This happened in the year 1908. Vittalrao obtained leave and came down to Mangalore for his wedding. The bride was Umabai, the second daughter of Sri M. Ramarao, an insurance agent at Mangalore. As is the custom among the Saraswats, the bride was given the name Rukmabai (after the consort of the Deity Vithoba of Pandharpur) by her parents-in-law on her entry into her husband's family.

Rukmabai was a cultured lady with a strongly religious bent of mind. Having been brought up in a family known for its rigid orthodoxy, she had naturally to some extent an orthodox and conservative bias. But the views held by her husband, especially in matters relating to religion, were entirely at variance with her own. He was frankly a modernist in his outlook and opinions while she belonged to the conservative school of thought. Yet in course of time she subordinated her own ideals to those of her husband and fell in with his line of thought.

Vittalrao returned to Gulbarga after his marriage and resumed his duties. But within a couple of months, the management of the mill where he was employed changed hands. The new owners dispensed with his services and Vittalrao returned to Madras in search of fresh employment.

—12—

Life—an Awry Tale

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife.
—*Longfellow*

THE STORY OF Vittalrao's life of service is the story of a chequered career. It appeared as if Dame Fortune took a special delight in playing her vile tricks with him. Throughout his life in service, brief periods of employment were invariably followed by even longer periods of unemployment and idleness. He would hardly settle down at one place, depending upon the appointment he had secured, when circumstances so seemed to work up that he would lose the post for no fault of his, and would once again embark on a quest of securing some fresh means of livelihood. Thus, for him, continued domestic felicity was not to be, and the sweet pleasures of a home were, for the greater part of the year, denied to him.

Circumstances like these would have unnerved and

turned any man of a lesser calibre into a pessimist and a rank cynic; but with Vittalrao the effect was exactly the opposite. Adversity, on the other hand, tended to make him all the more optimistic and buoyant. He looked at it as if fate had held forth a challenge to him and he, a born fighter, took up the challenge fearlessly and entered the fray. It aroused in him all the spirit of recklessness so long latent, and he was all equal for the bout. To his keen sense of humour life was but a huge joke and this evaluation never let him go under.

Wherever he was employed, Vittalrao was liked both by his superior officers and his subordinates and fellow workmen. He took a special interest in the underdog and his superiors found in him a very efficient and painstaking hand.

He spent almost two months in Madras after his return from Gulbarga. Now he accepted an offer as spinning master in a mill at Gadag. He worked here for about a year. On one occasion he had to visit Hubli and this visit gave him an opportunity to have the Darshan of Sri Siddharudha Swami of Hubli. A drama entitled "Manovijaya" was enacted under the direct patronage of the revered saint. It was an allegorical play which showed how Viveka (personifying discrimination), though initially unsuccessful, eventually conquered and triumphed over the adverse evil forces in the end. This drama left a deep impression on Vittalrao's mind and he

still recalls very vividly the grand finale of this religious play.

The manager of the mill where Vittalrao worked would often leave the town entrusting the management to the spinning master. On one such occasion a certain disciplinary measure that Vittalrao was compelled to take against one of the workers was grossly misconstrued by them. They conspired together to waylay Vittalrao and assault him as he left the mill in the evening. Some of the assistants, coming to know of the plot, hastened to warn Vittalrao of the evil design and importuned him not to leave the mill premises by the front gate. But no heed was paid to the warnings and, when the mill closed for the day, Vittalrao, as usual with only an umbrella in his hand, walked towards the gate. About twenty-five men were at the gate with stout sticks in their hands lying in wait for him. Vittalrao calmly and smilingly surveyed the group for a moment and walked on absolutely unruffled. His smiling face and utter disregard for life evidently disarmed and unnerved the workmen and they dared not carry out their wicked intention.

When Vittalrao had spent about a year at Gadag, he received an offer from one of the mills at Quilon in the Travancore State. The prospects there looked rosy and tempting. He closed in with the offer and resigned his service at Gadag. Here at Quilon he served as a spinning

master of the mill and was later promoted to be its manager. His wife Rukmabai also joined him here.

But the old Dame was at her sly tricks again! During his stay at Quilon, Vittalrao hardly got, in any one month, the full salary agreed to be paid to him. The mill itself was tottering for want of finances. In the mill premises was a garden with a large number of coconut palms. From time to time the coconuts from here were sold and the proceeds utilised towards the payment of the salaries of the manager and his subordinates! Very soon Vittalrao was forced to close down his house and send his wife back to Mangalore as it was difficult to get enough even to run his establishment.

One Sunday, when Vittalrao was all alone in the mill office, a fitter in the mechanical workshop, tall and stout, came and stood at the entrance of the office with a big unsheathed knife in his hand. The poor fellow had not received his wages for a good few months and had become desperate. He demanded payment of his wages there and then and threatened Vittalrao that unless they were paid to him forthwith he would not let him leave the office without peril to his life. At this challenge Vittalrao told the fitter that no amount of threats would frighten him and further assured him that he was quite prepared to fight his way out. So saying, he got up from his chair and, seizing a heavy rosewood ruler from the table, stepped towards the door brandishing the ruler.

This was something for which the workman was not prepared at all. Seeing the grim determination on his manager's face he became thoroughly frightened and instantly took to his heels as he was a bully—and all bullies are cowards at heart. This incident and the one that happened at Gadag are but a couple of the many dangerous situations that Vittalrao had to face in his life and that revealed his unflinching courage and utter fearlessness of death.

He spent eight months in all at Quilon. He was now left with no other choice but to quit the thankless job which brought him neither work nor recompense. But before starting afresh in search of employment, he decided to spend a few months with his parents at Hosdrug.

—13—

Birth of Daughter

I have a good reason to be content,
For thank God I can read and perhaps
Understand Shakespeare to his depth.
—John Keats

VITTALRAO STAYED at Hosdrug for four months on this occasion. He felt a deep interest in astrology and for some time devoted himself to the study of books on the subject. He gained a rudimentary knowledge of astrology but soon gave up further pursuit of this interesting science.

He again took up reading the works of his favourite dramatist, Shakespeare. In the afternoons he would read and translate Shakespeare's dramas to his father in Konkani. Santhappayya, an old *vakil* of the place and friend of his father, would also attend the reading. Vittalrao's manner of translating the dramas was so vivid and realistic that when pathetic passages from tragedies like *King Lear* or *Othello* were read out, his listeners would actually be moved to tears. Among

the listeners Santhappayya for one was so bewitched by Vittalrao's translation of Shakespeare that he was unfailingly regular in his attendance. If on any day Vittalrao should be engaged with some other book, the old gentleman would actually beg Vittalrao to read him at least some portions from Shakespeare.

Vittalrao next proceeded to Bombay in search of work but his efforts met with little success. He then went to Hubli but with no better results. During his stay at Hubli, his friend Chandragiri Shivarao took him to the Arudha Math and Vittalrao had for the second time the Darshan of the great saint, Sri Siddharudha Swami.

Some time later, through the good offices of Sri Dhareshwar Sadashivarao, the donor of the scholarship at the V.J.T. Institute, Vittalrao secured an appointment at a waste mill in Madras, owned by one Mohideen Pichai Saheb. He served in this mill for two years. Here also the same old story repeated itself. He never received his salary in full and repeated pressure on the proprietor failed to bring forth even half of it. Whenever pressed for the salary, the pious Saheb would say, "Brother, God will give; God will give." But God never gave!

In May 1913, Rukmabai gave birth to a girl in the local hospital. The child was named Ramabai.

Pichai Saheb's God was evidently not in a mood to pour out money and this made it increasingly difficult

for Vittalrao to continue further in the old gentleman's employ. He soon succeeded in getting an appointment in the Coimbatore Spinning Mills as a spinning master and thither he moved with his wife and child.

Vittalrao had always a soft corner for his subordinates, especially the mill-hands. Whenever an occasion arose, he doughtily championed their cause and, although the mill-hands held him in great regard, that very reason made him unpopular in the eyes of the European management of the mill and incurred for him their displeasure.

In 1914, when Vittalrao was at Coimbatore, there came the sad tidings of the passing away of his mother. She had been ailing and almost bedridden for several years past. For some time Vittalrao felt very deeply the loss of his dear mother. He hastened to Hosdrug to join his other brothers in performing the funeral rites of the departed one. All his other brothers were also there, and it was a unique though sad occasion in the family when all the ten brothers and one of the sisters met together, probably for the first and the last time.

When Vittalrao returned to Coimbatore a change in the management of the mill was in the air. Scenting the possibility of being asked to quit his job, he sent away his wife and child in advance to Mangalore. His premonitions proved true and when the changeover occurred he was given notice terminating his services.

—14—

Further Vicissitudes

This life is all chequer'd with pleasures and woes. —*Thomas Moore*

VITTALRAO CAME to Hosdrug and stayed for a month before proceeding to Bombay. Soon after his arrival in Bombay, he was invited by K.D. Nerurkar, his old friend at the Victoria Institute, to go over to Ahmedabad. Nerurkar was at the time employed as an electrical engineer at Ahmedabad. After an intense effort for about a month, Vittalrao secured an appointment there as spinning master in a mill owned by two Bania brothers.

The salary of his new office was low and petty, yet the work was arduous. It consisted chiefly of erecting heavy machinery of the mill. From early morn till late at night Vittalrao had to work at the fitting up of the machines, and most of the evenings he would return home quite exhausted. He was staying with his friend Nerurkar and his wife, both of whom were very hospitable to him. One day Vittalrao had such heavy work to do at the mill

that he returned to his friend's house in the evening utterly fatigued—every inch of his body aching with intense pain. Directly he reached the house, he lay down in the parlour and began to roll on the ground unable to bear the excruciating pain. Seeing his friend's plight Nerurkar gave him an oil massage and a warm bath. This gave Vittalrao great relief for the night and he attended his mill duties, as usual, the next day.

Now came an offer from Nadiad to work in a mill there. The salary was good but the contract was only for a period of four months. Here the mill was owned and managed by an old man over eighty years of age. The owner was so weak that he had to be carried from place to place on a coir cot. But his tongue was both strong and violent. The old proprietor was a past master in the use of the choicest billingsgate and his command over all the terms of abuse was remarkably complete. There was no clerk or workman in the factory who had not been lashed by his scorpion tongue. Vittalrao was duly warned by these employees of their old master's weakness for indulging in abuse. Whenever Vittalrao was called by the owner to his side for any consultation, Vittalrao would preface his talk with a stern warning to the old mill-owner not to let loose his tongue and that his violent language would not be tolerated even for a moment. These rebuffs from his new spinning master were something quite new to the old gentleman. All the

reputation and prestige that he had so long built upon his intemperate tongue seemed to be in jeopardy now! He would rather send away his new employee than put his tongue under leash. So within two months of his four-month contract in the mill, the old man paid Vittalrao the full salary for the stipulated term and discharged him.

Vittalrao returned to Bombay with his family. He sent back his wife and child to Mangalore and stayed behind for a while to see if he could secure employment anywhere in the city.

—15—

Launching on a Business Career

The prayer of faith shall save the sick;
And the Lord shall raise him up.
—James V: 15

VITTALRAO STAYED in Bombay for about a couple of months but all his efforts to secure employment proved futile. That he should have to be in search of a means of livelihood every now and then filled him with disgust. Just then he received an invitation from his father-in-law at Mangalore to join him in the cloth business that he had newly started. So Vittalrao finally came down to Mangalore towards the close of 1917 and joined his father-in-law in his business.

But the standard of commercial ethics which ordinarily ruled the business world was something new and strange to Vittalrao. It went against his grain to stoop to any of the "tricks of the trade" by which alone, according to the belief prevailing in the commercial world, one could attain any degree of success in

business. The standard of his conception was something higher and nobler than the one which circumstances now forced him to conform to. He loved to be straight and square in all his dealings and hated the very idea of lending himself to chicanery and subterfuge. Inevitably this led to a clash between father-in-law and son-in-law, and Vittalrao severed his connection with the business.

Vittalrao now started on a small scale the work of dyeing and printing *sarries*. In a small room he conducted all his experiments in dyeing and printing fabrics. About this time his wife was laid up with a severe attack of smallpox and his daughter, Ramabai, with whooping cough. Vittalrao kept vigil at the bedside of the patients day and night, and after a time Ramabai recovered from her illness; but Rukmabai's condition grew worse and worse day by day until one day her very life was despaired of. Sorely tried by intense worry and anxiety, Vittalrao approached the photo of Sri Pandurangashram Swamiji of Chitrapur Math hanging in his room and prayed deep and long for the recovery of the patient. As he knelt down before the picture of the Swamiji, burning tears flowed down his cheeks. As he prayed, a sort of calm and peace stole over his agonised mind, and from that moment onwards Rukmabai began to improve rapidly and was before long her normal self again.

This experience wrought an important change in Vittalrao's attitude towards life. A sort of dispassion for earthly objects seized him. He would talk to everybody only of God and of the teachings of saints; and would freely pour out his heart especially to his elder brother, Sitaramrao, who was now the chief sanitary inspector of the Mangalore Municipality, and to his close friend, Dr Umanathrao, both of whom were very religiously inclined and with whom Vittalrao had a sympathetic understanding.

Almost every night he would repair to his brother's house, taking along with him his little daughter to attend the Bhajan held there, and after Bhajan an interesting discussion would take place between the two brothers, sometimes far into the night, on a variety of philosophical topics.

This dispassion and zest for religion waned away for a time during the period of business activities but only to revive with added intensity and force at a later stage.

The work of dyeing fabrics and printing *sarries* which Vittalrao had started on a small scale soon widened in its scope and he found it necessary to move to bigger premises and also to open a shop in the town to book orders and transact business. He received considerable encouragement and assistance in the enterprise from Sitaramrao. A large house was rented at Falnir to serve the dual purpose of residential quarters and workshop.

A shop was also opened near the Milagres Church and the new business was styled, "Sri Sitaram Vittal Co."

Vittalrao now invited his co-brother, Chandragiri Narsingrao, who was working in Bombay, to join in the new business as a partner, and both of them shifted to the new quarters with their families towards the middle of 1919.

—16—

Sri Sitaram Vittal Co.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will.
—*Shakespeare*

THE NEWLY-OPENED business was conducted on a pretty large scale both in dyed and printed *sarries* and in the sale of dyes. Vittalrao attended to the workshop at home while Narsingrao attended to the shop in the town. Later, Vittalrao's eldest brother, Narsingrao, also joined the business as a partner.

Vittalrao put his heart and soul into the work and would personally lead his workmen in carrying out the different processes of dyeing fabrics. It was a familiar sight in those days to see Vittalrao with his shirt and *dhoti* besplashed with all sorts of colours. The products of Sri Sitaram Vittal Co. were highly appreciated by the public and even won a gold medal at one of the exhibitions at Mangalore.

But Vittalrao was too good to be a business man. The wages that he paid his workmen were higher than what

similar work would have earned for them elsewhere. Increments to the staff were frequent and were fixed without any thought of the financial condition of the company. The scales started tilting dangerously toward the debit side. The expenses became heavy and whatever profits were made, they were swallowed up by the day to day overhead expenses. There was no capital to back up the concern; still less any reserve funds to fall back upon in times of emergency. The company was rushing headlong toward disaster. In course of time his two partners also left the business one after the other, as the state of affairs was neither bright nor hopeful. Such a precarious condition would have wellnigh crushed anyone, but it left Vittalrao as irrepressible as ever. About this time he worked most enthusiastically at a scheme to establish a power-loom factory as a joint stock concern at Mangalore. He took great pains to collect all the necessary statistics and data, and even the Articles of Association were drawn up, but the scheme fell through for lack of sufficient encouragement and response from the local capitalists.

The writer had at this time the good fortune to stay with Vittalrao for his college course and had therefore the privilege and opportunity to come into close and intimate contact with him. The nights especially—the only time when Vittalrao relaxed a little from his arduous duties of the day—he would devote to reading

light or serious literature. Vittalrao would be in his element especially when his brother Sitaramrao or Dr Umanathrao were also in his company. On such occasions their talks would often prolong into late hours. Sometimes his father, too, would join his son's company and there would be no end to the gaiety of the moment.

For us youngsters, these talks were a rare treat. The discussions would be of absorbing interest and cover a wide field, from the sacred to the mundane. Politics was the talk of the day. Mahatma Gandhi had just then assumed the reins of the Congress, and his non-co-operation movement had galvanised overnight, as it were, the political life of India. His message of *charkha* and *khaddar* echoed and re-echoed throughout the length and breadth of Hindustan. Like Sitaramrao and Umanathrao, Vittalrao too was an ardent nationalist. He became a great admirer of Gandhiji and took to wearing *khaddar*.

Sometimes the discussions would turn upon such learned subjects as the tragedies of Shakespeare or the works of poets like Milton, Byron, Keats and Shelley. In all these discussions Vittalrao was quite at home, and could hold his own against any other scholar. Often the talks would assume a lighter vein and one would come across rare flashes of wit and humour. Sometimes he would narrate an anecdote or a story, be it from some

humorous writer like W. W. Jacobs or from his own life, but his presentation was so provokingly funny and unique that the house would resound with peals of laughter from his listeners.

Occasionally his cousin, Mark Sanjivrao, would drop in for a friendly chat. Sanjivrao, who was a convert to Christianity and a sincere and zealous missionary at that, would try his best to impress Vittalrao with the superiority of his own faith. But Vittalrao, always eager for an intellectual bout, would vehemently argue for the other side and the discussion would at times drag on for hours; in the end, they would part just as good friends as ever, but each unconvinced of the other's point of view as at the start of their discussion and neither any the wiser!

No one who saw or heard Vittalrao in those carefree and ebullient moods could scarce have guessed that there, under all this boyish cheerfulness and laughter, ran a streak of genuine anxiety for the business. The secret of it was that even in those days Vittalrao had the great gift of looking at things with a detached spirit, and shaking off for the time being all cares and worries as if they were never meant for him. His motto appeared to be to live in the living present and let God take care of the morrow.

—17—

Providence to the Rescue

Cast thy burden on the Lord,
And He shall sustain thee.
—*Holy Bible*

ON THE ONE HAND the financial condition of the business concern was drifting from bad to worse. On the other, Vittalrao's domestic life was none too happy. His wife, Rukmabai, had become a chronic asthmatic patient and was now almost an invalid.

As observed in an earlier chapter, she was a strong-willed lady with an orthodox outlook, while her husband was modern in the sense that he refused to subscribe or submit to the superannuated notions of religion and religious life, and the abounding bigotry and superstition with which they were surrounded. He was severe and outspoken in his condemnation of orthodoxy—especially its archaic ritualism—and he had little patience with the pampered priestly order who fostered it. Although Rukmabai's love and respect for her husband would ultimately make her yield to his

viewpoint, it was not without a painful clash between them.

Vittalrao was very much attached to his only child, Ramabai, then seven years old, as much as she was to him. He centred all his love and affection on his daughter. He would take her to school every morning and escort her back in the afternoon. He would join her in her games and patiently answer all the questions that childish fancy or curiosity prompted her to put to him, and she would be his constant companion during his leisure hours. Yet, very soon, a time was to come when this excessive love for his only child was to be wiped out completely by the universal vision that he had, and his child was to be to him in no sense different from the other children that came to him.

But slowly and imperceptibly the external circumstances were helping Vittalrao's religious inclination to become deeper and his spirit of dispassion to gain an added strength and impetus. Every evening he spent an hour at the house of Sitaramrao, whose children would be engaged in Bhajan before the image of Sri Krishna. During the Bhajan, Vittalrao would lose himself in a blissful state of self-forgetfulness. He now commenced reading afresh the lofty teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, the works of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Rama Tirtha, as well as other religious books like the *Yoga Vasishtha* with an intense interest. These

works seemed now to unveil to him a deeper meaning and significance than they ever did before and had the effect of accelerating the speed of the spiritual evolution that was subtly taking place within him.

It was at this time that Vittalrao started chanting the Lord's Name of *Rām* and the repetition of the Name brought him great mental peace and joy. He kept up a ceaseless flow of the blessed Name on his tongue and its humming sound would automatically issue from his lips even when he was at work or walking in the streets.

The affairs of Sri Sitaram Vittal Co. were plunging deeper and deeper into a quagmire of financial liabilities. Creditors all round were pressing Vittalrao for settlement of their dues. It seemed that only Providence could rescue him now from the impending crash and disaster.

But the Lord's mercy is proverbial and it works in a mysterious manner "His wonders to perform". Has not the Lord held forth the divine assurance in the *Gita*—"To those men who worship Me alone thinking of no other, to those ever harmonious, I bring full security"—and have we not read of innumerable instances in the lives of our great saints, sages and saviours how repeatedly He ran to the succour of His devotees in distress? Even so He came to Vittalrao's rescue in a most wonderful way at a time when everything was past all hope and only a miracle could stave off the utter ruin.

One day a gentleman came to see Vittalrao at his house where he was carrying on his dyeing work. This gentleman was a well-to-do lawyer of Mangalore and had only recently given up his practice at the Bar in answer to Mahatmaji's call to boycott the Law Courts. He took a sudden liking for Vittalrao, and before their talk had proceeded far, he offered to join him as a partner in his business. Vittalrao placed before him a true and complete picture of the company's state of affairs and frankly told him that to join the business at this juncture was tantamount to sharing the deep hole that he himself was then in. But the friend was not to be dissuaded and he made immediate arrangements to become a partner in the firm. Besides liquidating all the company's liabilities he invested a pretty big sum in erecting forty hand-looms for the manufacture of *khaddar*. Later on he erected a shed also to house these looms. From the time he came in as a partner he was looking after the business at the shop and Vittalrao was managing the hand-loom establishment.

But things for Vittalrao were moving rather fast. Although his new partner was all kindness and saw to it that Vittalrao's household did not lack anything, Vittalrao's mind was from day to day running fast in the direction of God. The Lord's Name was continuously working on his tongue. He gave up the night meal and other petty comforts of the body. His Sadhana evoked

remonstrance all around. He started spending the greater part of the nights in the repetition of the Name. Rukmabai became thoroughly frightened at the strange turn her husband's life was rapidly taking now. No persuasion, appeal and protest, either from her or from his child, could induce him to alter the course he was now made to follow. For he felt very strongly that he was set upon this path by that Highest Power which he was struggling to attain and realise.

—18—

The Struggle and Initiation

I plunged into the depthless sea of life,
And came by the rarest gem—Thy Name.
—Swami Ramdas

THIS CRITICAL period in Vittalrao's life and the psychological struggle he was now undergoing have been so beautifully and succinctly described by him in his later great work, *In Quest of God*, that the writer seeks no excuse to quote here extensively from the first chapter in that book.

This is what Swami Ramdas, as he has been known ever since, says in his own inimitable way concerning this period of his life:

"It was a period of terrible stress and restlessness, all of his own making. In this utterly helpless condition, full of misery, where was relief? Where was rest? This was the heart's cry of Ramdas. The cry was heard, and from the Great Void came the voice, 'Despair not! Trust Me and thou shalt be free!' This was the voice of Ram. These encouraging words of Ram proved like a plank

thrown towards a man struggling for very life in the stormy waves of a raging sea. The great assurance soothed the aching heart of helpless Ramdas like gentle rain on thirsting earth.

"Thenceforward, a part of the time that was formerly devoted to worldly affairs was taken up for meditation of Ram, who for that period gave Ramdas real peace and relief. Gradually, love for Ram, the giver of peace, increased. The more Ramdas meditated on and uttered His Name the greater the relief and pleasure he felt. Nights, free as they are from worldly duties, were in course of time utilised for Ram Bhajan with scarcely one or two hours rest.

"Ramdas' devotion for Ram progressed by leaps and bounds. Whenever free from worldly duties, for ever so small a period, Ramdas would meditate on and utter the Name of Ram. Walking in the streets he would be uttering, 'Ram, Ram'.

"Ramdas was now losing attraction for the objects of the world. Sleep, except for one or two hours in the night, was given up for the sake of Ram. Fineries in clothes and dress were replaced by coarse *khaddar*; bed was substituted by a bare mat; food, first two meals a day, was reduced to one and after some time even this was given up for plantains and boiled potatoes. Chillies and salt were totally eschewed—no taste but for Ram. Meditation of Ram continued apace. It encroached

well into the day hours and the so-called worldly duties.

"At this stage one day, Ramdas' father came to him, sent by Ram, and, calling him aside, gave him the Upadesh or initiation of the Ram Mantram, *Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram*, assuring Ramdas that by repeating this Mantram at all times, Ram would give him eternal happiness. This initiation from the father—who thereafter has been looked upon as Gurudev—hastened the aspirant on in his spiritual progress.

"Off and on Ramdas was prompted by Ram to read the teachings of Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*; of Jesus Christ in the New Testament; of Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India* and *Ethical Religion*. The young plant of devotion to Ram was thus nurtured in the electric atmosphere created by the influence of these great men on the mind of humble Ramdas. It was at this time that it slowly dawned upon the mind of Ramdas that Ram was the only Reality and all else was false. Whilst desire for the enjoyment of worldly things was fast falling off, the consideration of *me* and *mine* was also wearing out. The sense of possession and relationship was vanishing. All thought, all mind, all heart, all soul was being concentrated on Ram—Ram covering up and absorbing everything".

—19—

The Way of the Cross

There is no other way to life
But the way of the Cross.

—Holy Bible

IT WOULD BE worthwhile for us to take a peep into the rigorous life of Sadhana that Vittalrao now led. As days passed by, his life became more and more severely simple and ascetic. He had already discarded the use of his coat, and his apparel now consisted of a piece of *dhoti* four cubits long, carelessly wound round his body, a loose, collarless shirt and a white cap, all made of coarse, handspun *khaddar*. On account of the severe reduction and change in his diet, he had grown very pale and lean. He walked in the streets with his eyes straight ahead and distant-looking. If any friend or relation met him on the road, the former had to stop him to talk to him. But Vittalrao talked very little, and that too only when absolutely necessary. He would just smile, and only the slow, sweet and rhythmic humming sound of *Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram* would issue from his lips.

He would move about his work in an absorbed state of mental ecstasy.

On one occasion when he was sitting in his room repeating the Mantram at night, his brother-in-law, who was on very friendly and intimate terms with him, came with the intention of advising Vittalrao to give up his strange way of living, as it was causing pain to his dear ones and relations. As he stepped into the room, Vittalrao sensed the mission on which he had come and with emphatic determination addressed him thus: "Look here, I will go on repeating the Mantram so incessantly and to such an intense degree as to make these very walls resound with its echo!"

The friend who was just opening his mouth to frame the words of his protest was simply taken aback at Vittalrao's ringing words. He thought that discretion was the better part of valour and, jumping out of the room, disappeared precipitately. Instead of retarding the pace of Vittalrao's Sadhana, the brother-in-law's visit only helped to inflame it and speed it on.

Vittalrao would get up at four o'clock in the morning and run to the Kadri Hill. There in one of the tanks he would have his bath and, after bath, he would go to an elevated rock and sit down for meditation till about seven. Later, he gave up even his midday meals. He now subsisted entirely on boiled potatoes and fruit, and these too he would eat only when he felt hungry. He had

before this given up the use of his dentures. He bathed in cold water drawn out of the well by himself and washed his own clothes. A bare mat sufficed for lying down but he kept himself awake the whole night in the repetition of the Mantram. It may be that Vittalrao was entirely without sleep for six months consecutively and the Lord's Name never left his lips even for a moment during this period.

The news that Vittalrao was becoming perfectly unworldly and indifferent to his household affairs soon spread among his relations and caused them no little concern. One day, his eldest sister, Lakshmi Devi, was induced by some of the relations to offer some sweets to Vittalrao. Both Vittalrao and Lakshmi Devi had grown up together and between them there was a strong bond of mutual love and regard. These people were therefore led to think that if she should offer anything to her brother, he would not, out of regard for her, refuse to comply with her wishes. But Vittalrao was adamant in his resolve and refused to accept the proffered sweets. Finding all their protests and pleadings of little avail, both Ramabai and her mother, Rukmabai, adopted the same course of diet as Vittalrao followed. Vittalrao advised them to desist but they continued to have it for a month or two when at last they found it necessary to return to normal food.

Commenting on this period of Vittalrao's life, his

brother, Sanjivrao, writes in the June issue of Vol III of *The Vision* as follows:

"I used to visit Kanara once every two or three years. During my visits I would stay for a few days with my brothers. During my stay with brother Sitaramrao in Mangalore I was told that brother Vittalrao, who had been managing a weaving establishment in Mangalore for another gentleman, had developed an intense disgust for the world. I went and saw him. I found him wearing the coarse *khaddar* and the bench he was sitting on at the time of my visit was strewn with religious books, amongst which I remember having seen the works of Swami Rama Tirtha. My talk with him told me that he was not going to remain long in Mangalore, and that because he was under an obligation to his partner he had to continue there for some time longer. What exactly he intended to do after fulfilling his part of the obligation, he did not inform me.

"A couple of days after my visit to him, he happened to come one night to Sitaramrao's house along with Dr Umanathrao. Mahatma Gandhi became the topic of conversation. There was some discussion about the impracticability of passive resistance—Satyagraha—as preached by the Mahatma. In the course of the conversation Vittalrao remarked, 'These fetters are galling. Why not I snap them?' At once my other brother met this remark vehemently with an exposition of the duties

of a householder as he understood them and how it would be cowardice to shirk them, etc. This did not at all convince Vittalrao. Soon after this discussion Dr Umanathrao and himself left. That night, reviewing the conversation, it struck me that Vittalrao was in dead earnest when he declared his intention of 'snapping the bonds'. I expressed my fear regarding this subject to Sitaramrao who just pooh-poohed the whole matter, adding how even when things were considerably less bright, Vittalrao had not thought of giving up the world. His assurance did not satisfy me.

"After my return to Ernakulam I had news from time to time of how, like a Sannyasin, Vittalrao was living, first reducing the meals from two to one and later giving up that also and living on boiled potatoes. Naturally, this self-denial on his part brought great anxiety to his relations, for he was adamant in spite of protests and persuasions from all quarters. At this juncture I had a letter from father in which he asked me to write to Vittalrao and persuade him to break his fast and take two meals. I wrote, urging that due to dear father's old age he should not go on with the fast. My letter brought a prompt but brief reply. It said that since he began the fast he felt, if anything, better than before, and he was trying it as an experiment. The letter ended with the statement that 'he had realised the hollowness of life'. I did not pursue the matter as I knew it was useless".

—20—

Towards the Final Plunge

'Watchman, what of the night?'
The watchman said, 'The morning cometh.'
—Holy Bible

EVEN IN THE INTENSE state of detachment (Vairagya) and Sadhana described in the last chapter, Vittalrao was attending to all the duties pertaining to the weaving establishment with meticulous care. Even so, the vision of universal life was slowly dawning upon him. Consequently he had become extremely kind, charitable and forgiving towards the workmen serving under him. He freely moved among them and treated them as equals. This equality of treatment meted out to the workers one day evoked a burst of vehement protest from Sitaramrao, only to be brushed aside with a sweet and gentle smile from Vittalrao.

He felt a comradeship with all living beings and was swept away by a compassion for all those who suffered. He now also became highly sensitive to the pain and suffering of others and felt as if he himself was

experiencing all the pain and sorrows which others were undergoing.

One evening as Vittalrao was passing along the road leading to the Kadri Hill he met a bullock cart. As he neared the cart, he found that the cartman was mercilessly beating the bullocks to induce them to go faster. Vittalrao could not bear the sight. He actually seemed to feel the smarting pain of the blow every time the cartman heavily laid the lash on the bullocks' backs. With a loud cry he begged the cartman not to beat the poor, dumb creatures but the cartman heeded not. So before another blow was dealt to the bullocks, Vittalrao ran away from the painful scene as fast as he could.

At home he would advise his wife and daughter not to injure or cause any harm to even the tiniest of God's creatures, however disagreeable they might be. This paternal advice made such a deep and abiding impression on Ramabai that even to this day she tries to carry out her father's precept literally.

At about this time an acquaintance of Vittalrao in the town fell seriously ill. His was an advanced case of tuberculosis, and he was considered to be past all medical aid. Vittalrao would repair to the house of the ailing friend every evening and spend the night at his bedside cheering the sick man with his company and ministrations. This labour of love he continued until the friend breathed his last.

Now and again Vittalrao would feel a vague intuition that he was very soon to renounce everything and be altogether God's own. One day, when he had gone to the town to see his partner-friend, he gave expression to this urge to kick up everything and go away somewhere. When the friend heard this—he was all these days watching the trend of Vittalrao's life with considerable anxiety and misgiving—he displayed a frightened look and cried out, "If you go away, you will only be leaving me destitute on the roadside." But this remark of protest left Vittalrao's mind unaffected because he knew that his life had become a plaything in the hands of the Almighty, to be shaped and moulded as He alone willed.

Slowly the idea of renouncing everything and getting away from his present environs was gathering momentum. He knew not yet what course this step on his part would take and how and when it would finally take shape. All that he knew was that the hour of the supreme call—to give up everything that he called his own in this world and make the final plunge into the Infinite—would not long be delayed. It was to be a daring leap into the mystic unknown, and called for tremendous courage to take it. But it was a leap actuated by the same Great Power as placed the Divine Mantram on his lips and turned his vision towards It; and Vittalrao was all ready and eager for the grand

adventure when the supreme hour struck—an adventure that meant untold suffering and mortification of the body. In the language of the mystics, it was to be an adventure "to storm the very City of God and win eternal freedom"!

—21—

Crossing the Rubicon

Flee unto Him for shelter with all thy being, O Bharata! By His Grace thou shalt obtain supreme peace, and the everlasting dwelling-place.

—Bhagavad Gita, XVIII:62

IT WAS THE ZERO hour for Vittalrao's life—the supreme moment towards which his life during these last two years was slowly but inexorably moving itself for ultimate fulfilment. The hour of destiny had at last arrived, when he was to break asunder all the shackles that still bound him to the worldly life, and cast himself entirely and absolutely on divine mercy in the great venture on which he was to sally forth in pursuit of the vision of the Life Universal. It was the momentous time when he was to cut himself away from all the moorings that held him to this world and set his tiny boat sailing in the infinite expanse of the divine Ocean, seemingly without a rudder, chart or compass, daring the very storms and tempests that would ceaselessly assail him

and try to crush his spirit. But Vittalrao was fortified in the knowledge that it was the Divine Pilot who was guiding his little boat into the unknown and unchartered seas. Where then was the need for any fear? Or where any need for anxiety?

This is how Swamiji describes this critical stage of his life in his *In Quest of God*:

"So one night, while engaged in drinking the sweetness of His Name, Ramdas was made to think in the following strain: 'O Ram! when Thy slave finds Thee at once so powerful and so loving, and he who trusts Thee can be sure of true peace and happiness, why should he not throw himself entirely on Thy mercy, which can be possible only by giving up everything he called "mine"? Thou art all-in-all to Thy slave. Thou art the sole protector in the world. Men are deluded when they declare, "I do this; I do that; this is mine; that is mine." All, O Ram, is Thine and all things are done by Thee alone. Thy slave's one prayer to Thee is to take him under Thy complete guidance and remove the "I"-ness in him.'

"This prayer was heard. Ramdas' heart heaved a heavy sigh. A hazy desire to renounce all and wander in the garb of a mendicant in quest of Ram now wafted over his mind.

"Now Ram prompted Ramdas to open at random the book, *Light of Asia*, which lay before him at the

time. His eyes rested upon the pages wherein is described the great renunciation of Lord Buddha, who says:

For now the hour is come when I should quit
This golden prison where my heart lives caged
To find the truth which henceforth I will seek
For all men's sake until the truth be found.

"Then Ramdas similarly opened the New Testament and lighted upon these definite words of Lord Jesus Christ:

And everyone that hath forsaken houses or brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life.

"Then again Ramdas was actuated in the same way to refer to the *Bhagavad Gita* and he read the following verse in it:

Abandoning all duties come to Me alone for shelter; sorrow not, I will liberate thee from all sins.

"Ram had thus spoken out through the words of these three great incarnations—Buddha, Christ and Krishna. All of them pointed to the same path, the path of renunciation. At once Ramdas made up his mind to give up for the sake of Ram all that he till then hugged to

his bosom as his own, and get out of the bondage of worldly life".

The very Ram to whom he was praying for deliverance from worldly bondage, now conspired with His devotee to make it easier for him to get away from worldly life. Just then it so happened that both his wife and daughter were invited to stay for a couple of days at the former's father's house in the town, and were away from the home. Seizing this valuable opportunity, Vittalrao, without anybody's knowledge, purchased a small quantity of red ochre and, coming home, dyed two of his four *khaddar* clothes into that sacred colour. The same night he wrote two letters, one to his wife whom, as he describes, "Ram had made him look upon for some time past only as his sister" and the other to his friend, his partner in the business.

The letter to his wife ran thus:

Dear Sister,

You are to me only a sister in future. Sri Ram, at whose feet I have surrendered myself entirely has called me away from the past sphere of life. I go forth a beggar into the wide world chanting the sweet Name of Sri Ram. You know I have no ambition in life except to struggle for the attainment of Sri Ram's Grace and love. To that aim alone I dedicate the rest of my life and suffer for it—suffer

to any extent. We may not meet again—at least as husband and wife. Walk always in the path of God and truth, and make Rame do the same.

Don't give up the spinning-wheel. It will give you peace and happiness. Let Rame also work it.

Sri Ram's blessings on you and Rame. He protects you both.

Yours affectionately,

27-12-22 —*P. Vittalrao*

The above beautiful and touching letter has been published in *Letters of Swami Ramdas*, Vol I. "Rame" referred to in the above letter is the pet name of his daughter, Ramabai.

It may be mentioned here that, true to her husband's parting behest, Rukmabai made the spinning-wheel her constant companion and the source of her comfort, peace and happiness, almost till her very last day.

To quote Swamiji's words again: "The resolution was made. At five o'clock in the morning Ramdas bade farewell to a world for which he had lost all attraction—in which he could find nothing to call his own. The body, the mind, the soul—all laid at the feet of Ram, that eternal Being full of love and full of mercy".

Thus on 27th December, 1922, in his 38th year, Vittalrao turned his back on worldly life to which he was never more to return.

—22—

Rebirth Into Divinity

Thou hast made us for Thyself;
And our hearts shall find no rest
Save in Thee, O Lord!

—St. Paul

VITTALRAO BOARDED the Madras Mail, as it was then called, at 5a.m. and got down at Erode junction in the evening. The only worldly wealth that he now carried with him was Rs.25, in addition to a couple of clothes dyed in red ochre and a few books, including the *Bhagavad Gita, Light of Asia*, and the New Testament.

At Erode, Vittalrao found himself strangely helpless without any plan or thought for the future. He knew not where the Divine Will was leading him, nor why it made him alight at Erode station of all the places. He wandered in the town for a while and, as darkness set in, he approached a hut by the wayside. Finding a middle-aged woman at the entrance, he begged her to give him some food. The kind-hearted woman gladly welcomed him in and served him with some rice and curds. With

great difficulty could she be induced to accept any money for the food she served.

Vittalrao returned to the station and took rest laying himself down in a corner. All the time, all the way from Mangalore, the Divine Mantram was on his lips. About midnight a bell rang announcing the arrival of a train. Vittalrao got up and found himself accosted by a Tamilian who enquired of him as to where he was going. But Vittalrao himself did not know what reply to give. The Tamilian, however, proposed that he would take him to Trichinopoly, for which place he himself was bound. Out of the money provided by Vittalrao he purchased a ticket for him for Trichinopoly and both got into the train standing at the platform.

The train reached Trichinopoly towards the evening and Vittalrao immediately proceeded into the city. Taking rest for the night on the verandah of a house by the roadside, Vittalrao started on foot to Srirangam early the next morning. Srirangam is only seven miles from Trichinopoly and he reached the town by eight o'clock.

We continue here the telling description given by Swamiji himself in *In Quest of God*:

"Here Ramdas was first let into the secret of Ram's purpose in drawing him out from the sphere of his former life and surroundings—and that purpose was to take Ramdas on a pilgrimage to sacred shrines and holy

rivers. At Srirangam the beautiful river Kaveri was flowing in all her purity and majesty. Going up to it Ramdas bathed in the clear waters of the river. Here on the banks of the Kaveri, Ramdas assumed by Ram's command the robe of a Sannyasin. It was a momentous step by taking which Ram gave Ramdas an entirely new birth. The white clothes previously worn by Ramdas were offered up to the river Kaveri, who carried them away in her rushing waters. The ochre-coloured clothes were put on and the following prayer went up to the feet of the Almighty Ram:

" 'O Ram! O love infinite, protector of all the worlds! It is by Thy wish alone that Thy humble slave is induced to adopt Sannyas. In Thy name alone, O Ram, he has given up worldly life—all bonds, all ties have been cut asunder! O Ram, bless Thy poor devotee with Thy Grace! May Ramdas be endowed with strength, faith and courage to carry out in Thy name the following vows and bear all trials and all kinds of sorrows that may beset the path of a Sannyasin in his passage through the rough and perilous life of a mendicant!—

" '1. That this life henceforth be entirely consecrated to meditation and the service of Sri Ram.

" '2. That strict celibacy be observed, looking upon all women as mothers.

" '3. That the body be maintained upon the food procured by alms or on what was offered as alms.' "

Here it was on this momentous occasion that he, as commanded by Ram, assumed the name of "Ramdas", meaning the "servant of the Lord", to signify the new birth and the new life he had entered upon.

This is how Swamiji further ecstatically describes his spiritual rebirth: "The thrills of a new birth, a new life, filled with the sweet love of Ram, were felt. A peace came upon the struggling soul of Ramdas. The turmoil ceased. Ram's own hands seemed to have touched the head of his slave—Ram blessed. O tears, flow on, for the mere joy of deliverance! Sorrow, anxiety and care—all vanished, never to return. Glory be to Ram!

"The great blessings came from Ram: 'I take thee under My guidance and protection. Remain ever My devotee. Thy name shall be Ramdas.' Yes, what a grand privilege it is to become the Das of Ram, who is all love, all kindness, all mercy and all forgiveness!"

Yea, it was truly a glorious rebirth—a new life in its entirety—a life of utter and absolute dedication to the Lord that was soon to lead the spiritual infant on to the attainment of the radiant and transcendent oneness with the Divinity.

Elsewhere, in joyous strains, Swamiji sings:

God-thought seized me and made me divine;
With this new light and joy
I roamed on this earth like one distraught.

And yet again:

For my life burns like a flame
At the shrine of my Lord.
It enters into His being
Still a worshipper at His Feet.
My Lord I found within—
My heart His temple of light.
He is my Master, my Mother;
I am His slave, His child.

Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram

—23—

The Writer's Postscript

I OWE IT TO my friends to say a word of personal explanation as I close this imperfect narrative of the earlier period of Swamiji's life. The idea of writing Swamiji's biography came to me as an earnest suggestion from, among others, my esteemed friend Dr P. S. Ramaswamy of Salem. Dr Ramaswamy was also good enough to prepare notes of the various incidents of Swamiji's earlier life as narrated to him by Swamiji himself. These notes were of very great help and guidance to me in writing this narrative, and I feel I cannot be sufficiently thankful to the kindly doctor for simplifying my work. I have also drawn upon whatever information I could gather from Swamiji's immediate relatives and from his daughter, Ramabai, and also from my own recollections.

I took up this work in the summer of 1939 and made appreciable progress, but the work came to a dead-stop when my services were transferred to Bombay; and there it remained, more on account of my lethargy than anything else, until I took up again a couple of months

ago the broken threads to weave this little web of a wondrous life. I feel happy that Swamiji's blessings have enabled me at last to bring this work to completion.

Years ago a bundle fell into my hands of correspondence that had passed between Vittalrao and his nephew, Ramanand (now a professor at Presidency College, Madras), and between Vittalrao and his friend, G. Sunderrao (now a member of the Mysore Civil Service). It was all in the lighter vein, abounding in improvised dramatic pieces, verses, anecdotes, titbits, *inter alia*. For years I treasured this sheaf of letters but somehow, to my lasting regret, this valuable collection was irretrievably lost from my library during my absence in Bombay for law studies. If this collection were with me today, it would have doubtless been of immense help to me.

Lastly, I tender my grateful thanks to Dada Butani for honouring his little brother's work with his esteemed Foreword.

Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram

"Sridhar Nivas" —*Chandra Shekhar*
Matunga 1st January, 1946

—24—

SWAMI RAMDAS

A Glimpse into His Early Life

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, my uncle Vittal Rao suddenly renounced the world and left Mangalore for an unknown destination, leaving behind him his wife and child. This bewildered me not a little, for I had grown very fond of his family, and I became sore in my heart for my helpless aunt and my little cousin. His renunciation reminded me of the other Great Renunciation, 2500 years ago, of Prince Siddhartha. He too had left behind him a wife and a child, and had walked the rough and thorny path alone. I envisaged in my mind all the terrors of this dreadful path — all the tribulations and agonies of body and soul, the harrowing trials and hardships, the rigorous self-discipline and relentless mortifications of the flesh, and the enormous cruelties and indignities which unthinking man heaps on those who choose this path. All these must have been the lot of the Great Prince, and, undoubtedly, would be the lot of my uncle also in

his quest of the Eternal. But Prince Siddhartha had triumphed over all tribulations and had returned to the world as the Enlightened One. Would my uncle also do as He did, and return to us as one of the Shining Ones of the world?

Or – dread thought – would he come back to us like so many people of puny stature, who, in a fit of cussedness leave their hearths and homes and take to the gerrua cloth, but, after a time, unable to bear the rigours of this fearful path, sneak back into the world and creep into our lives humbled and crestfallen, the very shadows of their former selves? It was indeed a dread and disturbing thought to me.

But not for long. For, more than 35 years ago, it had been given to me to sense a future greatness for him. But it was hardly the greatness which is his now!

I was a stripling then studying in the High School classes at Mangalore. My uncle was then having a chequered life at various places — Quilon, Coimbatore, Madras, Gadag, etc. In between his one job and another he used to come to Mangalore and stay with his father-in-law, sometimes for pretty long periods. And when he did so, I had the happiest days of my adolescence! I would cast aside all my legitimate studies and even games, and

barely keeping to my attendance in class, I would snatch every opportunity to go to him and remain at his feet and listen to his magic words and discourses — not on Religion, but on Literature, and English Literature at that! While all the other grown-ups about me were spending their leisure hours in devouring Charles Garvice, Guy Boothby, William Le Queux and other penny dreadfuls, as if their very lives depended upon their doing so, here was an uncle, not even a Matriculate, opening up to me the magic casements of English literature one after another, with a fervour and a passion that later on in my collegiate studies, I failed to detect even in Professors of English! And some of these were Englishmen too!

One day he would discourse to me on the charm of Lamb's "Essays of Elia", the next day he would show to me the power and strength of Byron's verse in his "Childe Harold" or his bitter sarcasm in his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers". The third day he would bring to me the glory and grandeur of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" or the sombre magnificence of his "Sonnets". The fourth day he would introduce to me the gall and bitterness in the "Letters of Junius" or the innocence and loveliness in the "Letters of Cowper". The fifth day he would discourse to me on Johnson and his circle of friends

— Boswel, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Garrick, Reynolds, Burke, etc. — with a special bias towards poor Goldsmith, or read to me Ben Johnson's "The Alchemist". The sixth day he would invite me to be one of the homely company in Burn's "A Cottar's Saturday Night" or help me to make friends with the delightful Sir Roger de Coverley of Addison and Steele. On the seventh day he would bring out to me the fire from Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" or let loose the flood of laughter from the stories of W.W. Jacobs and Jerome K. Jerome. And so on and on, according to the mood of the hour. And this went on during all those intermittent periods of his stay at Mangalore! No Master of English, great or small, was ever neglected. Poets and dramatists, essayists and story-writers, letter-writers and reviewers, humorists and satirists were all paraded by him before me, in all their greatness or littleness, and made to live again before me in flesh and blood. And all the while I was only a High School lad! It was a wild, mad living in literature for both of us, and nothing else seemed to have any importance for either of us. For, had he not created for me and for himself an entirely new world, far more fascinating than the world around us, and people with such literary giants and fascinating figures like Shakespeare and Ben Johnson,

Marlowe and Milton, Dryden and Pope, Addison and Steele, Keats and Shelley, Byron and Burns, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Johnson and Bosewell, Cowper and Goldsmith, Garrick and Scheridan, and Fox and Burke — not to mention W.W. Jacobs and Jerome K. Jerome? Who would not revel in such a fascinating world, and who would want any others?

But far more fascinating to me than all this was my uncle himself! His glowing discourses on these literary giants and their spacious times, his irrepressible wit and humour, the vividness of his thoughts and feelings, the fervid words with which he gave shape to them, his wonderful gift of telling story and the marvellous facility and flow of his language, all these made me look upon him, in relation to the other grown-ups about me, as something of a superman, and created between himself and the adolescent me a far stronger bond than one of mere affection between an uncle and a nephew. In fact he had become to me in no time a Pied Piper of Hamelin — a Piper, who, I was certain, had fed on honey-dew and drunk the milk of paradise.

I confess I have absolutely no idea as to how my uncle appeared then to my other relatives and friends. That one literary aspect of his life, coupled with his ever bubbling humour, was the only aspect

I knew, and that aspect had been all in all to me concerning him. I never bothered to find out the other sides of my uncle. Even at this distance of time, when I think of my Vittu bappa — as I used to call him then, "Vittu" being shortened form of 'Vittal' and 'bappa' meaning 'uncle' in Konkani — it is only the picture of a fervid young man fired with an intense literary zeal and ever bubbling with humour and laughter that stands before me like a big grown-up child than a man of the world. 'A perfectly guileless person' would probably hit off the mark. He was so simple in his dress and manners that it was a standing joke among us that he did not even know how to wear a dhoti properly. That he would not know even if a portion of him was sliced off, was another tag with which we used to rag him. And then, alas, that remarkable faculty of absent-mindedness, with which our family as a whole seems to have been gifted, undoubtedly reached its peak in him and involved him in many a domestic disaster of the minor sort. And then also, I remember, the Stage had its fascination for him and made him to produce a number of amateur plays in his younger days, and in these plays he was not only the producer and an actor but the dress-maker, curtain-painter and scene-shifter as well! Even later on, I remember his beautiful pro-

duction of the Marathi play "Santha Damaji" in Mangalore and his magnificent acting as a Mussalman General in it. He had drafted most of us to act in this production, and I remember also how I barely escaped with the skin of my teeth from wearing a blouse and saree in it! And then also, I cannot forget that incident in which he figured as a hero — of the Wode-housian type. He was, like most of the members of our family, a very heavy sleeper in those days, not getting up usually before nine or ten in the morning! One day one of his younger brothers — my Shina bappa, in fact (the late Shri Srinivasa Rao, Artist and Photographer at Udipi) — was asked to wake him up and he did — with disastrous results to himself. My Vittu bappa was wild and furious at being awakened an hour earlier than his usual time and he chased the culprit out of the house, mad with fury. Round and round the house the two brothers ran — the scene was in the best Wodehousian manner — until at last the gasping younger brother made a successful get-away. And the elder, my Vittu bappa, nothing daunted, went back to his bed and slept soundly for three more hours!

Our mad living in literature, as I have called it, was carried on even after we bacame separated by the exigencies of our different spheres of activity,

I still continuing to be a student. This took the shape of what seemed to be an interminable and weighty correspondence — weighty because each time we wrote to each other (and that was at least once a week, if not twice) our letters were usually not less than 24 to 36 pages long! (I do not remember ever having written such long letters even to my wife when we were newly married!) I have called them letters, but they were not. Each 'letter' was a Miscellany of humorous anecdotes and skits, serious poems and doggerels, light stories and sketches, observations and criticisms — all wild, care-free writing. Neither of us had the least desire to see this writing in print. That is why we wrote to each other with such perfect abandon, out of sheer joy of writing. We started this correspondence because that was the only way we could still commune with each other in spite of our separation. My Vittu bappa's letters to me were, very often, so screamingly funny that I invariably fell into the habit of addressing him in my letters as 'Witty bappa'. (Pardon the poor pun, I was in my teens then.)

But the rosy dawn heralds the sun. It was in one such letter that he sent to me, along with some uproariously funny stuff, a poem which thrilled me to the core. It was 'THE SONG ETERNAL' (since

published in "Poems" by Swami Ramdas.

Till then I had been familiar with his remarkable creativeness in the various forms of literature — stories, sketches, essays, skits, satirical pieces, versification, play-writing etc. Nothing he had written a considerable number of poems, and many of them had shown a depth of feeling and artistry that was far, far above the average. But this poem, 'The Song Eternal', completely lifted me off my feet and made me think. Here was an entirely new side to my erstwhile 'Witty bappa'. Obviously, a flash from the Divine had illuminated his soul for a moment. But what a poet is there, worth his salt, who does not get such glimpses of the Divine at least occasionally? I contented myself with this reflection, and carried on my correspondence with him as before — on the mundane plane.

Thus it can be seen why I was completely bewildered when early in 1923 I learnt that my uncle had suddenly left his hearth and home and gone forth in quest of God, treading the rough and thorny path of renunciation. I could hardly reconcile the uncle I had known so intimately with the Sannyasi he had set himself to be. The greatness I had discovered for him in seed form, and had envisaged for him in the future, was hardly the greatness of an all-embracing spiritual life. I had eagerly

looked forward to his bursting upon Indian literary scene as a great literary figure — as an editor of ability and genius of some Indian counterpart of a journal like "John O'London's Weekly" or the London "Punch", as a teller of stories in the manner of W.W. Jacobs or Jerome K. Jerome, as a consummate artist in the field of the essay or humour, as an Indo-Anglican poet of no mean distinction, or as all these put together. Never for a moment, in spite of his 'The Song Eternal', did I believe that he, who had loved this life of ours so well and so much, would renounce it so suddenly or so completely for something, which to me at least, seemed then so intangible or so impossible of attainment.

But renounce he did, and that so completely and thoroughly too.

In far-off Tellichery I could hear occasionally the reverberations and rumblings caused by this great renunciation among our friends and the members of our family. I could hear angry voices raised, sense new hatreds born, and catch the echoes of all sorts of wild and fantastic stories thrown about in the air. I thought of my helpless aunt and her child at Mangalore, and I became very sad. I thought of my old grand-father at Kasargod, and became more sad. I became dimly aware that the intimate bond that had existed between my uncle

and myself might also have become just driftwood in this great renunciation, and I became still more sad and wistful. But I had settled in life just then. Other interests had began to come into my life and engross me with their insistence. But somewhere, in the deep recesses of my heart, there was a vague unceasing pain that I had lost, once and for all, something which had been very precious in my life.

A year or so passed. I heard that my uncle had been discovered in Bombay and had been brought back to Mangalore by my aunt and her child. I hurried to meet him but with considerably mixed feelings, for I did not know how he would receive me or in what shape I would see him. Would he be my uncle still? Would the old bond between us still continue to exist?

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, I think. I heard that he had come just then to the house of another uncle of mine, the late Sri Sitaram Rao, from his cave in the Kadri Hill. I stood at the door of the hall in which he was seated, and looked at him. When I saw him I could hardly move from where I stood. It was not my Vittu bappa I saw before me.

Here, before me, was a thoroughly emaciated form, with rib bones all sticking out, and cheeks all hollow. His bony legs and arms were like thin

sticks. He was seated in the yogic posture with legs crossed and eyes closed. A piece of rough gerrua cloth was round his loins, and one of it had been thrown carelessly over his left shoulder. Heaven's light seemed to play about him, and I saw before me a picture that was all holy and sublime, the very picture, in fact, of the Emaciated Buddha, the Enlightened One, in meditation.

With an effort I went in, prostrated myself before him and sat near him. After some time he opened his eyes — they were sparkling with a strange divine light. When he saw me near him, a smile immediately flashed across his emaciated face — but was it a smile of recognition? I did not know. There was some all-embracing universality about that smile which I could not understand. For all my former intimacy with him, I had become just another 'Ram' to him. Tears welled into my eyes. A hundred questions leapt to my tongue, but I could hardly articulate them. I was so choked up with feelings. All that I could do was to sit there drinking him with my tear-drenched eyes.

I prostrated myself once again before him and left the place with my wife. And when I walked back home, I was proudly concious of the fact that my uncle did return to us and to the world as Swami Ramdas — as an Englightened Soul.

—P. Ramanand
—1947

Our Beloved Papa

Thou art Love, Highest Truth Thou art!
Compassionate! We enshrine Thee in heart.
Our thoughts with rapture towards Thee wing,
Merciful one, Thy glories we sing.

Differentiating not as high and low
towards Thy children Thy love doth flow,
Radiance and Love shining upon Thy face,
Bringest together children of all race.
"Ram" is the sweet name Thou givest to all,
"Ram" is the sweet name no power can pall;
Thou leadest us to the Supremest gain,
Vision of Self everywhere to attain.

Gathered together at Thy feet we stand,
Thou in Thy mercy hast taken us in hand,
Weak and unsteady our feet though they be,
Secure we stand, Papa, sheltered by Thee.

Parent of all! all things rest in Thy care,
The worlds throb with Thy presence everywhere,
Lord! all the three worlds move at Thy behest,
Thou art everything Thyself manifest.

Ramabai C. Trikannad.
1947.

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Glossary

Ahimsa	.. *Non-violence*
Avadhut	.. *A sage who is oblivious of the world and his bodily existence*
Avatars	.. *Incarnations*
Bhagavat Dharma	.. *The mode of life in which man is conscious of the Lord in all actions, thoughts and things*
Bhajan	.. *Singing of devotional songs*
Bhakti	.. *Devotion*
Bhiksha	.. *Alms*
Darshan	.. *Visit or vision*
Das	.. *Servant*
Gurudev	.. *Spiritual master or preceptor*
Ishta Devata	.. *Favourite Deity*
Mantram	.. *Holy incantation*
Ram Bhajan	.. *Singing of devotional songs in praise of Sri Ram*
Sadhana	.. *Spiritual practice*
Samsaric	.. *Pertaining to the world*
Samsara	.. *Worldly life*
Sannyasin	.. *Religious mendicant*
Vairagya	.. *Dispassion*